

MARSH, CHERYL R., Ph.D. *From the Madhouse to the Unreal City: The Dramatic Monologue, Polyvocality, and Agency in Robert Browning, Sarah Piatt, and T. S. Eliot.* (2014).

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This project examines the dramatic monologue and its subsequent variations in order to address philosophical questions about agency that implicitly derive from the genre. The intentional displacement of the Romantic lyric “I” into other personas questions the existence of an essential “speaking self.” Without a unified speaking self, agency becomes indeterminate. Where does the “self” begin and where does it end? What about the “self” is essentially esoteric and, alternatively, how does the “self” intervene in material reality? The poetic genre of the dramatic monologue and its subsequent polyvocal variations explore this set of questions inherently.

Early Victorian dramatic monologues dramatized the poem through personas mediated by masks, which necessarily comprise at least two influences within the speaking persona. Critics such as Robert Langbaum, Herbert Tucker, Isobel Armstrong, and Glynnis Byron contend that 1830s and 1840s dramatic monologues must be read as a reaction against the intensely confessional Romantic lyrics of the early nineteenth century, where the poet and persona are generally viewed as unified. Because the dramatic monologues’ content creates a definitive break between the poet and the persona, the form operates in the mode of what Isobel Armstrong calls the “double poem.” Hence, a consideration of irony is paramount when interpreting this genre. Because there are always at least two (and often more) guiding influences within the construction of the dramatic monologue, this form inherently questions the idea of an

essential “self.” Though we can argue that all poetic personas are constructed, the dramatic monologue calls attention to that construction through its experimentation with multiple “speaking” influences within the unified persona. Consequently, I consider polyvocal poems, with multiple and distinct speakers, to be the next variation or evolution of the dramatic monologue genre. With every addition of a new “voice” within a poem, the idea of an essential “self” becomes more tenuous.

Tangential to this discussion of an evolving definition of selfhood through aesthetic methods, my project also explores the ramifications of personal agency within the divided self. I focus this study on three key poets: Robert Browning, Sarah Piatt, and T. S. Eliot. In the chapter on Browning, I demonstrate that his dramatic monologues explore a divided sense of self through an imagined communion with the divine. For these dual characters, Browning consistently questions their boundaries of personal agency and, ultimately, culpability for their actions. The chapter on Sarah Piatt examines her call-and-response lyrics, focusing on how a divided self lacks the agency to grieve within American consolation culture. The chapter on T. S. Eliot pairs his complex polyvocal aesthetic with some thematic figures in his early poetry; this comparison suggests that such a fractured sense of self renders a person impotent, lacking agency. For these three poets, the form and content of the dramatic monologue and its subsequent variations offer means to explore the connections between a divided sense of self and personal agency.

FROM THE MADHOUSE TO THE UNREAL CITY: THE DRAMATIC  
MONOLOGUE, POLYVOCALITY, AND AGENCY IN  
ROBERT BROWNING, SARAH PIATT, AND  
T. S. ELIOT

by

Cheryl R. Marsh

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Approved by

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Committee Co-Chair

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Committee Co-Chair

To my parents: Rick, Renee, Machel, and Jim, for  
your unwavering love and support.

## APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair\_\_\_\_\_

Committee Co-Chair\_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: DIVIDED SELF AND AGENCY

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from the sea,  
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.  
--T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (lines 218-223)

In the famous passage above from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Tiresias, arguably one of most unified personas of the entire poem, claims a divided identity that crosses gender, temporal, spatial, and chronological boundaries. Vividly describing events that, ostensibly, he should not be able to see, Tiresias exemplifies a fragmented sense of "self." Though he can observe these circumstances, and though he claims to feel the typist's experiences, he seems unable to intervene within the scene. After the "unreproved, if undesired" union between the typist and "the young man carbuncular," Tiresias states: "And I Tiresias have foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed; / I who have sat by Thebes below the wall / And walked among the lowest of the dead" (lines 243-46). From this subjective stance, Tiresias claims allegiance with the typist and the young man on a physical level, while maintaining the ability to foretell the future and travel between the living and the dead. His sense of self encompasses many disparate contexts, and yet, he lacks the agency to participate. This persona characterizes a



particular paradigm that I trace in this project. His sense of self is diffuse, shared between and among many bodies, and his ability to interact in the world around him is limited. Like many of the impotent characters in *The Waste Land*, he seems to be “neither living nor dead,” though he retains the ability to narrate the events he sees and feels. He represents a speaking persona with a fractured identity that lacks any agency to affect the world around him.

Personas such as Tiresias inspired me to begin examining with a closer eye the speaking narrators of poems, especially the personas who dramatize events through a first-person perspective. Like others before me, I noticed that the “I” in many post-Romantic poems represented an entirely separate identity than that of the poet, which signaled an important shift in poetic expression. This separation between the poet’s personal voice and the persona’s speaking voice seemed to offer an experimental space where poets could explore perspectives outside of their own while simultaneously critiquing those perspectives through ironic treatment. The aesthetic approach itself provided a structure for rendering a divided identity. I knew that early Victorian dramatic monologues were often studied for this very reason, but when I was first introduced to Sarah Piatt’s poetry, I began to see connections between her dialogue poems and earlier incarnations of the dramatic monologue. Her poems explicitly juxtaposed the “I” of the dramatic monologues with a different speaking ironic voice, conveyed through two separate personas in conversation. From my perspective, Piatt’s polyvocal poems made visible the divided identity inherent to the dramatic monologue. I therefore began to read Piatt’s polyvocal lyrics as a subsequent incarnation of the

dramatic monologue. Knowing that the early twentieth century would usher in a new model of a fractured identity through Eliot, Pound, and others, I hypothesized that Piatt's polyvocal lyrics could be positioned as a transitional aesthetic form between the Victorian dramatic monologue and Modernist polyvocality. In a sense, then, this project coalesced around Sarah Piatt, in so much that she represents a pivotal figure between the Victorians and the Moderns.

When I began studying Piatt's dialogue poems more closely, I found them fascinating because of her ambiguous pronouns and the resulting complexity of voice; yet stylistically, she utilized diction and rhythms consistent with postbellum genteel poetry, which, generally, has not been recognized as complex. I began to see her as a poet who both adopted and rejected the genteel tropes of her contemporaries. Much of her poetry addressed topics characteristic of this period's poetry, such as death, motherhood, religion, and consolation. However, I detected an oppositional pattern to Piatt's conversations, where one of her personas invoked a pragmatic or more mature (sometimes bitter) stance, while the other communicated a traditional or, often, childlike voice. Her style and content often seemed at odds during these conversations. When I started to investigate this opposition, I found that in her poems about death, Piatt used the polyvocal aesthetic to express a type of embodied grief that contradicts many genteel consolation tropes. Over and over again, in these poems Piatt emphasized the material loss that comes with death and the need to grieve for such loss. Much like the Christian telos, postbellum consolation ideology concentrated more on a rewarding spiritual afterlife more than the tangible loss on earth. In stark contrast, Piatt's death poems not

only disregarded the possibility of an afterlife but also undercut the religious consolation tenets that dominated genteel ideology. Many of her poems about death metaphorically demanded the agency to grieve openly within the bounds of her consolation culture. In noticing this recurrent pattern, I began to think about how the divided sense of self built into the structure of these aesthetic approaches could affect agency and action. Starting from this vantage point with Piatt, I began to trace this pattern forward to T. S. Eliot's early poetry and noticed that similar questions regarding agency appeared in Eliot's corpus as well. Because I originally read Piatt's dialogue poems as the next iteration of the dramatic monologue form, I also looked back to Robert Browning's oeuvre and found a similar relationship demonstrated within some of his key dramatic monologues. These observations inspired me to begin tracing a formal line from Robert Browning to Piatt to Eliot. This line did not rely upon an argument of influence, but rather an exploration of how this aesthetic form evolved to reflect various cultural understandings of a divided speaking "self" and its ability to act.

This project examines the dramatic monologue and its subsequent variations in order to address philosophical questions about agency that implicitly derive from the genre itself. The form inspires readers to ask: where do the boundaries of the self begin and where do they end? What about the self is spiritual in nature, and, alternatively, how does the self act in material reality? If the self is confined within a sentient body, what, if anything, happens to the self after the death of the body? Under the taxonomy of agency, these questions point us to both philosophical and religious grounds. Spanning from the Victorians to the Modernists, the poetic genre of the dramatic monologue and its

subsequent variations inherently explore this set of questions. The intentional displacement of the lyric “I” into other personas and masks questions the existence of a unified speaking self in a specific spatial and temporal context. Without a unified speaking self, the poems suggest that the boundaries of agency become indeterminate. To what degree can this self intervene in reality? And, to what, if any, degree does some determinate conception of reality prevail over the boundaries of free will?

To begin this study on agency and form, I should first address how the dramatic monologue and its subsequent variations challenge the notion of an essential speaking “self.” Given that Elizabethan drama heavily influences the early dramatic monologues of the nineteenth century, elements of staging and acting are foundational to the form. Early Victorian dramatic monologues dramatized the poem through personas mediated by masks, so the poem comprises at least two influences within the speaking persona. Critics such as Robert Langbaum, Herbert Tucker, Isobel Armstrong, and Glynnis Byron contend that 1830s and 1840s dramatic monologues must be read as a reaction against the intensely confessional Romantic lyrics of the early nineteenth century, where the poet and persona are generally viewed as unified.<sup>1</sup> Because the dramatic monologues’ content creates a definitive break between the poet and the persona, the form operates in the mode of what Isobel Armstrong calls the “double poem” (13). However, unlike other such poems, the dramatic monologue is not bound within a dream, a framed narrative

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<sup>1</sup> This contention is generally accepted in the scholarship focusing on the dramatic monologue. For further support, see Robert Langbaum (79) and Herbert Tucker (23). In terms of the cultural and political implications of the dramatic monologue, see Isobel Armstrong *Victorian Poetry* (141) and Glennis Byron (33).

with a definitive narrator, or some other kind of distancing technique. The key to understanding the dramatic monologue is recognizing that the speaking “I” of the poem is outwardly indistinguishable from the poet’s voice, though it is completely separate on the experiential level. Hence, a consideration of irony is paramount when interpreting this genre. Because there are always at least two (and often more) guiding influences within the construction of the dramatic monologue, this form inherently questions the idea of an essential self.

Though we can argue that all poetic personas are constructed, the dramatic monologue calls attention to that construction through its experimentation with multiple “speaking” influences within the unified persona. Because of these divided speaking influences, I consider polyvocal poems, with multiple and distinct speakers, the next variation or evolution of the dramatic monologue genre. Also, perhaps, a variety of Armstrong’s “double” poems, polyvocal lyrics offer two or more distinct speaking voices with separate perspectives. In this manner, these lyrics retain some of the dramatic qualities of staged dramas, though the markers that signal different speakers are much less defined in than in their staged counterparts. In this way, the notion of an essential “speaking” self is further complicated, as it becomes impossible to distinguish between individual voices within a conversation and competing voices within one mind. With every addition of a new “voice” within a poem, the idea of the essential self becomes more tenuous.

Most scholars locate discussions of the self first within philosophical discourses. One can trace the Western notion of selfhood back to the writings of antiquity, but for the purposes of this discussion there is no need to trace the evolution of selfhood back to those origins. Indeed, the nineteenth-century European understanding of self stems mostly from Enlightenment ideologies and, more immediately, philosophical implications derived from the French Revolution. An understanding of the “self” in the nineteenth century requires an examination of relationships between the internal world of the mind and its interactions with the external world, including the body. Romantic notions of the individual resembled a Platonic construction in that ideal analogues between an internal perception and an external representation existed. Further, recognizing these ideal analogues in nature offered some means of transcendence. Therefore, external representations in nature not only reflected but also propagated an internal transformation.

Nineteenth-century writers, scholars, and thinkers who participated in trying to understand the self largely fall into the category of “moral philosophers.” In a study of the history of social psychology, Gustav Jahoda explains that “moral philosophy” invoked a wide range of meanings even at the time it was employed. However, one thing worth emphasizing is that in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “moral” often denoted what we now call “social.” As Jahoda stresses “it is clear that ‘moral behaviour’ essentially meant . . . how people behave towards one another, and therefore shades imperceptibly into what is now known as ‘interpersonal behaviour’” (27). Therefore the boundaries of understanding how the individual self related to society at

large were fraught with religious and theological concerns. These kinds of questions inevitably lead to queries about the nature of mankind and the definition of the “self.” Concomitantly, the dominant modes of nineteenth-century poetry participated in this evolving understanding of self.

In addition to its aesthetic affiliations, my study enters into conversation with the work of Armstrong, Byron, and Frances Dickey in terms of the social consequences of dramatic monologues. Eckbert Faas’s work that highlights connections between the dramatic monologue and the rise of the “new science” of Victorian psychiatry informs my project as well. Dramatic monologues of the 1840s were viewed by contemporary critics as “portraits in mental photography,” and I contend that the dramatic monologue and its subsequent variations reflected burgeoning developments in that “new science,” contributing to an understanding of the divided self. In this way, my project extends the contributions of Armstrong, Byron, Dickey, and Faas to suggest that the dramatic monologue and polyvocal lyrics both participated in and reflected the sociocultural development of late nineteenth-century psychology through an aesthetic form that inherently questions an essential identity.

Because I trace an aesthetic line between Victorian dramatic monologues and modernist polyvocality, two key studies that link the dramatic monologue and modernist poetics inform this project. In *Victorian and Modern Poetics*, Carol Christ writes of the dramatic monologue:

It at once emphasizes the relativity and contingency of truth while it strives to transcend that relativity by making the poem an object independent of the

personality of the poet. It is this tension between a conviction that the poem is inevitably a personal utterance and a desire to give it the status of an object which unites the Victorians with the moderns in their evolution of poetic forms that separate the speaker of the poem from the writer. (17)

Here, Christ argues that the separation between the poet's personal experiences and poem's ostensibly objective stance characterizes the genre of the dramatic monologue. Building upon this assumption, I argue that because of this separation, a dualistic view of the self is intrinsic to the form. In the progression I trace, Sarah Piatt's lyrics and Eliot's highly fragmented polyvocality introduce more speaking influences into the genre, and, by extension, into the configuration of the self. In her exploration of Victorian and modern portrait poems, Francis Dickey argues that scholarship on the dramatic monologue has "eclipsed" studies of the Victorian portrait poem, which also greatly influenced modernist poets. Supporting the idea of a dualistic view of the self, she contends that the traditional Victorian portrait poem represented a Cartesian view, with the interior representing the soul and the exterior representing the body. However, Dickey claims that poets such as Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne complicated this Cartesian view of the self. Browning used speech, rather than appearances, as the primary identity marker, while Rossetti and Swinburne began to redefine the limits of the external body. In her view, modernists adopted and extended these ideas, often positioning consciousness, or "selfhood," as communal, rather than individual (5-8). My project builds upon this argument, demonstrating that Eliot's poetry challenges the notion of an essential self through the most complex polyvocal methods yet.



Several other important studies inform my project. E. Warwick Slinn studies the self in Victorian poetry through the dialectic philosophies of Hegel and Derrida, approaching the subjective self as a discourse involving “post hoc teleology” and temporality; additionally, this self is constituted through difference.<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor’s scholarship on the history of interiority speaks to the modernists’ notion of a shared sense of selfhood. Foregrounding Pound and Eliot, Taylor positions early twentieth-century poetry as a revelatory experience that replaces the Romantic epiphany of being. According to him, modernist verse invokes an “interspatial” epiphany, which he differentiates from the Romantic epiphany that involves essential self-definition. Rather, interspatial epiphany creates an “energy” between words, objects, and images (476). Dickey expands this argument by stating that intermediality becomes the model for selfhood within this poetry of interspatial epiphany. Rather than an essential internal core driving external motivations, we have a “self” comprised of interchanges “between and among” disparate sources (9). This developing notion of the self, beginning with an internally unified conception and then evolving to an outwardly constructed model, can be traced in a poetic line from Victorian dramatic monologues to Modernist polyvocality. Adjacent to this discussion on an evolving definition of selfhood through aesthetic methods, my project also explores the ramifications of personal agency within the divided self. Anthony Cuda’s scholarship on Eliot’s “etherized patient” undergirds this discussion. In Eliot’s early poetry, Cuda contends that the marionette figure is a

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<sup>2</sup> This scholarship reflects the cultural studies trends of the 1990s, emphasizing dialectical approaches to definitions of the self. For a more nuanced discussion of the philosophical implications of subjectivity and Victorian poetry, see Slinn (3).

predecessor to the “etherized patient,” representing a kind of “radical passivity” that the poet embraces in order to harness the generative passion necessarily involved in artistic creation (34). My study builds upon this claim by linking Eliot’s many early passive figures, including the marionette, to his highly fragmented polyvocal aesthetic. Additionally, in tracing this link back to Browning’s dramatic monologues and Piatt’s lyrics, I demonstrate that the connection between a form that challenges the notion of an essential self and that raises questions of agency also appears in the genre’s earlier incarnations. These three poets use the dramatic monologue and its subsequent polyvocal variations offer a means to explore through both form and content the connections between a divided selfhood and personal agency.

## **Chapter Two**

I begin this study with Robert Browning, one of the progenitors of the dramatic monologue. As early as 1836, I found questions centered on agency and determinism in the companion monologues “Madhouse Cells.” These “cells” comprise two of Browning’s well-known dramatic monologues, “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Johannes Agricola in Meditation.” Here, Browning dramatizes the confessions of an antinomian clergy member and a brutal killer. Both men claim a state of divine allegiance, one through an extreme Calvinist doctrine of election and the other through some deterministic impetus carried in “the blood.” In Langbaum’s terms of sympathy and judgment, Browning sympathizes with these characters while simultaneously judging their narratives. Agricola insists that he can do no wrong because of his elect status, and

Porphyria's murderer absolves himself of culpability because of this divine impetus carried in his blood. Browning implicitly questions both positions, and in doing so, also questions the bounds of personal agency in material reality. Using these early monologues as a frame, this chapter traces this trope through several key texts in Browning's career, ending with the pinnacle of his dramatic monologues, *The Ring and the Book*. When examining Guido's two monologues, the same set of questions about agency and divine allegiance that appear in "Madhouse Cells" also arise. Given that Guido is both a minor deacon and a calculated killer, claiming the same elect status and deterministic impetus of the earlier characters, his character represents the quintessential litmus test for provisions of personal agency and culpability. Ultimately, Browning condemns Guido's character to death, finally overthrowing the notion of a deterministic reality with no grounds for free will. However, the dramatic monologue genre allows for a sympathetic exploration of these characters' positions, dramatizing their perspectives from a first person narrative that implicitly challenges the notion of an essential speaking self.

### **Chapter Three**

In chapter three I highlight the prolific Sarah Piatt and demonstrate how her poetry bridges the gap between the Victorian dramatic monologue and Modernist polyvocality. Recovered in the 1990s by Paula Bennett, Piatt's work offers an intermediate developmental stage of polyvocal dialogue lyrics. Like Browning, Piatt contests the notion of an essential speaking self by experimenting with the form of the

dramatic monologue. Rather than displacing the lyric “I” into a unified speaking mask, however, Piatt introduces other voices into the structure of the poetic genre itself. Often in the form of a call and response pattern, Piatt weaves different conversational voices into the poem, which notably changes the effect of the dramatic monologue. First, Piatt’s approach disrupts the configuration of a unified perspective that filters the poem’s narrative. Browning’s dramatic monologues question coherent selfhood by shifting the locus of perspective into a persona who dramatizes the poem. However, in Browning’s monologues the poem’s temporal and spatial circumference remain relatively consistent, with the persona speaking in a specific time and place. Piatt’s approach disrupts both the filtered perspective and the temporal and spatial circumference. Having two or more voices dramatize the poem adds another dissociative element to the dramatic monologue, as it becomes impossible to deduce if there are two separate speaking personas in the poem, or, alternatively, two separate voices within the mind of a single persona. Additionally, Piatt’s polyvocality disrupts the linear elements of Browning’s dramatic monologues. Though Browning juxtaposes disparate perspectives that narrate a common sequence of events in *The Ring and the Book*, he generally maintains a consistent perspective in the individual monologues. These combined monologues attempt to explain a common sequence of events and emphasize the relative nature of reality among varying perspectives. Piatt’s dramatized conversations emphasize the relative nature of perspective itself in shifting temporal and spatial contexts. In terms of genre, then, Browning’s dramatic monologues that question a coherent self become Piatt’s polyvocal lyrics that examine these selves within shifting temporal and spatial contexts.

Questions of agency and free will also arise within Piatt's polyvocal lyrics. Given that problems of agency are implicit to the genre of the dramatic monologue, they are also implicit to Piatt's polyvocal lyrics. While Browning explores agency and free will through both religious and legal contexts, Piatt explores issues of agency and free will through American genteel consolation literature. Consolation literature, especially regarding the loss of children, occupied a large space in late nineteenth-century America. Tropes of the departed turning into angels and cherubs abound in genteel poetry, which deemphasizes the palpable grief experienced by the bereaved. Using familiar genteel poetic diction and forms, Piatt's lyrics emphasize death's harsh material aspects. Her poems challenge cultural and religious tenets suggesting that comfort arrives after death in the form of heaven. For Piatt, these platitudes are not sufficient in the face of such material loss, and humans seem to have no agency in circumventing inevitable tragedy. This characterization of a cruel deterministic landscape aligns with American Realism, which emphasizes the trials of physical life over the potential rewards in the afterlife. Indeed, Piatt's poetry often questions heaven's very existence, concentrating rather on the limitations of an earthly one. She dramatizes events such as funerals by metonymically replacing the departed with fanciful symbols such as dolls, fairies, and saints, which align with genteel poetic tropes. However, her treatment of these symbols suggests that the metonymic humans, acting only as pawns in a pre-determined game, contain almost as little agency as their symbolic constructs. Tracing these symbols, this chapter highlights the evolution of the dramatic monologue form as well as Piatt's commentary on human agency in a seemingly deterministic corporeal reality.

## Chapter Four

The fourth chapter of this project demonstrates how T. S. Eliot's early work complicates the evolving aesthetic by adding multiple additional voices. Eliot's experiments with the dramatic monologue parallels Browning's; he also extends Piatt's experiments with polyvocality. In effect, though likely not a result of influence, his poetic style integrates the earlier poets' approaches. In the proper dramatic monologues like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Gerontion," Eliot dramatizes the poem through the perception of one persona, much as Browning does. However, departing from Browning's style, Eliot's unified personas do not remain in a consistent temporal and spatial context. Rather, their perspective integrates present as well as past, future, and even hypothetical incarnations of the same speaking persona. Browning often utilizes historical figures as the masks for his poetic characters, but Eliot's unified personas, like Prufrock, are seldom based on historical figures. In contrast, Eliot generally begins and ends his polyvocal lyrics with the same speaking persona, but throughout the poem other voices interrupt, which creates a highly fragmented effect. In Piatt's lyrics, usually we find two distinct voices, often involved in a call and response conversation. But Eliot's lyrics contain many voices, some more distinct than others. Thus, Eliot's early style integrates elements of both Browning and Piatt's work, but to a much more disintegrating effect.

To grasp more fully how Eliot builds polyvocal conversations into his poetry, I propose that we distinguish two levels: the horizontal and the vertical. Horizontal polyvocality refers to the poem's speakers, which often change and shift abruptly.

Generally, the speaking “I” that opens the poem becomes fragmented, resulting in a multiplication of voices. Additionally, Eliot often disrupts the temporal elements of the poem, so the speaking “I” might shift from the present to the past or future, which opens conversations between different incarnations of even the same speaking persona.

Simultaneously, Eliot uses allusion and quotation to invoke other “voices” from texts in literary, religious, and philosophical traditions. I will refer to these voices as “vertical” to distinguish them from those that actually narrate or dramatize the poem. While the horizontal sketches remain within the poem’s temporal and spatial circumference, the vertical interrupts the poem and intervenes, often at multiple points and with multiple effects, introducing, as it were, additional levels of polyvocality.

Eliot’s reinvented use of the dramatic monologue and polyvocal methods establishes a much more fragmented selfhood than either Browning or Piatt. Eliot’s multiple conversations that occur both vertically and horizontally undermine almost any consistency of voice that the poem might establish at the beginning and the end. Even in the more conventional dramatic monologues, multiple conversations are interwoven throughout, questioning the efficacy of any unified persona to communicate consistently through one perspective. For Eliot the perspective broadens to allow for one persona to express multiple voices, and therefore project a model of the self that includes different, and sometimes competing, impulses. The persona of the poem itself uses masks, so to speak, rather than the persona of the poem representing a unified mask.

Like Browning and Piatt, Eliot experiments with these poetic genres to explore the limitations of human agency within the boundaries of fate and free will. Time and again Eliot's poetry obsessively turns to themes of puppets and marionettes, suggesting that humans are, perhaps, mere playthings for some larger determining force. At the very least, we find that humans seem to have little control over themselves, especially regarding primal impulses. This chapter traces the evolution of the dramatic monologue and demonstrates how Eliot challenges the model of a singular speaking self through polyvocal methods. Starting with some of his earliest poetry, this chapter outlines how Eliot's earliest passive figures, like the marionettes, eventually coalesce into the impotent characters that narrate *The Waste Land*. Though the problems of human agency are never fully reconciled, the end of *The Waste Land* gestures towards a paradoxical solution involving an active surrendering.

## **Conclusion**

My concluding chapter of this project recapitulates the connections between the dramatic monologue, its subsequent polyvocal variations, and the evolution of an increasingly divided sense of self. Adjacent to this developing fractured identity are questions of agency and culpability. In comparing these poets, my project establishes a relationship between form and content that reflects a changing cultural understanding of how "the self" is constituted. Additionally, this concluding chapter examines some aesthetic imperatives present in both Browning and Eliot, which suggests that these two



poets experimented with voice in order to reach their respective estimations of an artistic truth.

## CHAPTER II

### “THOU MADEST ME A MADMAN”: AGENCY, CULPABILITY, AND THE DIVIDED SELF IN ROBERT BROWNING

I have God's warrant, could I blend  
All hideous sins, as in a cup,  
To drink the mingled venoms up;  
Secure my nature will convert  
The draught to blossoming gladness fast  
--Robert Browning, "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" (lines 33-37)

In the quotation above, Agricola, an antinomian Calvinist, claims a divine allegiance that positions him as one of the "elect." In his estimation, this status allows him to act according to his will, without fear of retribution, because his convergence with god absolves him from any spiritual consequences. Since he has god's "warrant," he is certain that his divine nature will "convert" any evils into "blossoming gladness." Here, Agricola exemplifies a notion of selfhood that is at once divided and whole. Paradoxically, his sense of self is split between his sentient body and his spiritual alignment, though also wholly unified through his perceived connection to god. Because of this connection, Agricola believes that his will is the same as god's will, which calls into question issues of agency, free will, and determinism. How much control does Agricola have over his own actions? And, if his will aligns with god's will, where does free will intervene?

Robert Browning presents the persona of Johannes Agricola through a dramatic monologue that gives us a first person account of Agricola's thought processes. As the

above model demonstrates, questions of selfhood and essential “speaking” selves are implicit to this genre. Because of the careful and conscious construction behind the personas, readers must approach these figures with caution. This chapter examines some of Robert Browning’s poetry with several questions in mind. How does the dramatic monologue genre challenge the notion of an essential speaking self? How does this sense of self entail personal agency and the ability to intervene in reality? To what degree, if any, does a deterministic conception of reality prevail over one’s free will? And, finally, within the boundaries of agency and determinism, how can society find people culpable for their actions? By examining relevant poems in Browning’s corpus, I highlight several models that speak to the above questions. Though these poems never fully reconcile a divided sense of self within the bounds of personal agency, they do offer a common theme that becomes implicit to the form itself. This chapter serves as a foundation for the following sections on Sarah Piatt and T. S. Eliot. Browning’s exploration of agency and selfhood in the dramatic monologue establishes the connection between form and content that my following chapters develop more fully. In the aesthetic line that I trace, Browning’s dramatic monologues anticipate Sarah Piatt’s call and response lyrics, which question one’s agency to grieve within American consolation culture. The last chapter on T. S. Eliot examines his use of an extreme polyvocal aesthetic alongside of figures that lack the agency to act decisively, suggesting that as the sense of self becomes more diffuse, so does the ability to intervene in one’s reality.

The frame of the dramatic monologue has generated an entire critical history. Traces of the form can be found as early as Chaucer and the Victorian manifestation of

the form finds its roots in Shakespeare and Elizabethan drama, particularly through the use of soliloquys. Most contemporary critics agree that the first dramatic monologues following the modern definition occurred in the 1830s and 40s with Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson, though that term has been applied retroactively. My focus with the dramatic monologue will be on the genre's challenge to an essential self and the questions of agency that arise from a divided subjective position. According to Eckbert Faas, the emergence of the dramatic monologue in the Victorian era grows from two main sources of influence—that of the Romantic “science of feelings” and Elizabethan drama (81). Indeed, one could argue that the revival of interest in Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists among Victorian critics occurred largely because of the rise of the mental sciences. Faas is clear in stating the importance of this legacy by making it the distinguishing factor for English literature. The Romantic “science of feelings” concerns the Romantic focus on emotion and spontaneity. In the late eighteenth century, philosophical characterizations of the self began to emphasize the internal workings of the mind, rather than an external manifestation or understanding of the self/soul divide. During this shift, focus moved from the intellectualism of the Enlightenment to a new mode of self-awareness that took emotions into account, which was first manifest in the eighteenth-century emphasis on sentiment and the man of feeling.

However, in apparent contradiction, toward the close of the Romantic period there was a need to express or render these “spontaneous” emotions through an objective approach. The dramatic monologue provided an aesthetic avenue that allowed the poet to dramatize strong emotions while also remaining objective. Additionally, the gap between

poet's personal voice and dramatic persona's voice allowed the poets to explore topics that might have been otherwise culturally taboo. As I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter, Isobel Armstrong claims that the first two proper dramatic monologues that Browning published after *Pauline* (1833) represent an experimental rebuttal to the aesthetic theories of John Stuart Mill and William Fox in reference to the critical reception of *Pauline*. Essentially, Armstrong positions Browning's first dramatic monologues as an aesthetic exercise in shielding himself from the deeply personal attacks he experienced upon publishing his first work. Regardless of the motivation, however, it is clear that the early experiments of the form focused on dramatizing the internal workings of the mind through, ostensibly, an objective form. Consequently, this approach both created and exemplified a divided sense of self.

### **Early “Madhouse Cells,” Divine Allegiance, and Culpability**

To begin discussing Robert Browning's early dramatic monologues I wish to go to two rather famous examples collected in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) but coupled under the title “Madhouse Cells.” They were first published together in *The Monthly Repository* in 1836, with “Porphyria” (later “Porphyria's Lover”) appearing before “Johannes Agricola” (later “Johannes Agricola in Meditation”). However, when the “Madhouse Cells” poems appear in the *Dramatic Lyrics* collection “Johannes Agricola” moved ahead of “Porphyria's Lover” to occupy the primary position. Regardless of order, and perhaps even because of the poems' interchangeability, these poems should be read as companion pieces—thematically, through content, and through the original sources that inspired the

poems. Stylistically they are similar in that they are both examples of dramatic monologues. Additionally, as Michael Mason acknowledges, both poems comprise twelve five line stanzas in iambic pentameter with rhyme schemes of ABABB (255). Though much critical attention has been directed at one or the other of the poems (particularly “Porphyria”), few studies have linked the two dramatic monologues together.<sup>1</sup>

In first accounting for Browning’s generally unfavorable critical reception to *Pauline* (1833), Isobel Armstrong positions Browning’s “Madhouse Cells” as an experimental response to contemporary aesthetic theories by John Stuart Mill and William Fox.<sup>2</sup> Generally, Mill believed that poetry should be purely expressive, not extending beyond the poet’s display of private emotion, though without displaying “self-conscious subjectivity” (136). Armstrong surmises:

Mill effectively removes poetic knowledge into the post-Kantian realm of the aesthetic, cut off from discursive rationality and instrumental activity . . . poetry educates by belonging to the domain of private feeling and not by negotiating the public world of power. (136)

From this small sampling of Mill’s poetics, we can observe the inclination to view poetry as a solipsistic exercise, relegated to the poet’s inner emotional life. Armstrong deems this ideology a “poetics of exclusion,” which, in turn, fosters a “politics of exclusion or

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Karlin argues that Browning often wrote “paired poems” in “Browning’s Paired Poems.” Though he does not specifically address “Madhouse Cells” other than in name, he posits that some of Browning’s paired poems offer a dialectical argument, “where there is not just an opposition between two poems, but a progression of understanding, a creation of knowledge or awareness, which happens as a result of reading them together” (211). My analysis of “Madhouse Cells” builds upon this contention.

<sup>2</sup> See Isobel Armstrong *Victorian Poetry* (136-147).

enclosure as the speaking subject in his or her private cell of subjectivity communicates if at all by accidental empathy” (137). This particular characterization is important when positioning Browning’s “Madhouse Cells” as a response to Mill’s aesthetics. Armstrong argues that the two poems parody this solipsistic inclination in her ‘poetry of exclusion.’ In contradistinction to Mill, Fox posited that all poetry is dramatic and aligns the speaker or persona with an actor who must recognize his audience. Therefore, according to Armstrong, Browning’s early dramatic monologues become psychological texts rather than simply psychological expressions. She states: “in these poems Browning took on a double debate with both Mill and Fox, and a reading of them [“Madhouse Cells”] is not complete without an understanding of the way in which they both begin to reach towards another poetics” (141). It is through this lens that Armstrong positions Browning as a political poet, “not because he wrote directly of radical problems, but because it released him into the possibility of making a cultural critique in terms of the structure of the monologue itself” (141). By extending this contention, I argue that the structure of the dramatic monologue implicitly questions the notion of an essential self by calling attention to the multiple influences that characterize the internal workings of the mind. In “Madhouse Cells,” Browning emphasizes the division of selfhood through content that calls attention to personal agency and, subsequently, social culpability. In that sense, the structure of the dramatic monologue actually fosters the social critique.

Michael Mason’s study on “Madhouse Cells”<sup>3</sup> uses the term companion pieces in his chapter “Browning and the Dramatic Monologue.” Like Armstrong, he also positions

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<sup>3</sup> See Mason (234).

the pieces as dramatic, but suggests that Browning's treatment of the speakers' two utterances is ironic: "the speaker *betrays* important aspects of his state of mind rather than *articulating* them" (emphasis Mason 234). The notion of ironic betrayal in Browning's early dramatic monologues is not unique to Mason, who aligns his contention in part with W. Cadbury and Philip Drew, initially in opposition to Langbaum's neglect of the topic of irony within the dramatic monologue. Mason cites a passage in *Robert Browning's Prose Life of Stafford* as further proof of his position. In this passage, Browning speaks to the interpretation of Stafford's character:

those who carry their researches into the moral nature of mankind, cannot do better than impress on their minds, at the outset, that in the regions they explore, they are to expect no monsters—no essentially discordant termination to any 'mulier Formosa superne'. Infinitely and distinctly various as appear the shifting hues of our common nature when subjected to the prism of CIRCUMSTANCE, each ray into which it is broken is no less in itself a primitive colour, susceptible, indeed of vast modification, but incapable of further division. (qtd. in Mason 254)

Mason acknowledges that this passage is a bit opaque, but his interpretation emphasizes Browning's attention to consistency and circumstance. He surmises that Browning believed a man's character and intentions will become consistent if studied in enough detail, regardless of circumstance, which can initially make the behavior read as inconsistent (and labeled as lunacy or mad). However, with enough careful attention to the motivations of man's behavior, even ostensible 'lunatics' display consistent and logical actions and reactions (254). Therefore, as Mason interprets these companion pieces, Browning attempts to illustrate his ideas about analysis, madness, and consistency through these two personas, suggesting that an in depth study in consistency will make



even morally abhorrent characters sympathetic. In this light, then, Mason argues that Browning has written an account of moral insanity that invokes his thoughts on the consistency of behavior when studied in depth (258-64).

Additionally, Mason indicates that there are two known primary sources that inspire the content of “Porphyria’s Lover.” The first appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1818 as “Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary,” by John Wilson, which is an account of a German priest visiting a madman’s cell on the eve of his execution for murdering his mistress. The second known source is the poem “Marcian Collona,” (1820) by Browning’s friend Barry Cornwall. Cornwall acknowledges that “Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary” was in part the inspiration for “Marcian Collona,” and Browning took inspiration from both sources, according to Mason (255-58).<sup>4</sup> I also would like to focus on this aspect of Browning’s work with “Madhouse Cells,” particularly in relation to “Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary.” Though there are clear references to “Porphyria’s Lover” in this work that Mason covers adequately, I argue that this inspirational source holds the key to a dual interpretation of content between the two companion pieces—one that has yet to be fully discussed.

“Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary No. 1” appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1818.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the text, the editor explains that this extract represents a translation of the diary of a German clergyman, Rev. Dr. Gottlieb Michael Gosschen, who witnessed many unusual occurrences through his duties as a priest in Ratisbonne. According to the

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<sup>4</sup> Support for this claim can also be found in Woolford and Karlin’s preface to “Porphyria’s Lover” (328).

<sup>5</sup> The editor and translator of this text was John Wilson.

editor, two quartos of this manuscript had been given to the magazine because “many a dark story, well fitted to the groundwork of a romance,--many a tale of guilty love and repentance,--many a fearful monument of remorse and horror, might we extract from this record of dungeons and confessionals” (596). This description adequately summarizes the tone for the piece; however, I contend that Browning built upon this “romantic” foundation to explore more complex issues of agency and selfhood within the dramatic monologues.

In this short extract, the scene begins with Gosschen traveling to visit a murderer who has been enchained within a local dungeon, awaiting his execution set for the next day. Gosschen travels presumably to give last rites, as the priest has been awakened in the middle of the night to travel to this “madman’s” cell. The priest has known the accused since childhood from a personal association with his family and is unsurprised to find the man a criminal. The town is in an uproar because the man has murdered a young girl reported to be his lover (but whom he calls wife). This setting resounds strikingly with Browning’s companion pieces—here we find a German priest and a murderous madman in dialogue together within a cell. As the content and dialogue further unfolds in Gosschen’s narrative, the similarities become too many to ignore.

As Gosschen begins talking to the enchained man, the accused recounts the story of the night that he murdered the victim. In a section that echoes “Porphyria,” the murderer describes how he stabbed his “beloved” over and over (a detail not included in the poem) and how he enjoyed the act itself. He attests:

‘Do you think there was no pleasure in murdering her? I grasped her by that radiant, that golden hair,—I bared those snow-white breasts,—I dragged her sweet body towards me, and, as God is my witness, I stabbed and stabbed her with this very dagger, ten, twenty, forty times, through and through her heart. She never so much as gave one shriek, for she was dead in a moment, but she would not have shrieked had she endured pang after pang, for she saw my face of wrath turned upon her,—she knew that my wrath was just, and that I did right to murder her who would have forsaken her lover in his insanity.’ (597)

Maria Von Richterstein, the victim here, bears a striking resemblance to Porphyria (blonde hair, blue eyes), as does the fact that despite the brutal scenario, neither Gosschen’s Maria nor Porphyria supposedly feel any pain throughout the murder (a contention that any degree of pragmatism should dismiss). However, it is the confessional dialogue after the madman recounts the murder scene that speaks directly to themes resonant in “Johannes Agricola.”

In Gosschen’s version of the story, after the madman murders his lover in a fit of passion he realizes what he has done and begins to rail against god in an effort to both understand and perhaps justify his actions. He notes that he had been imprisoned for insanity before, which he attributes to an inherited genetic malfunction that has been passed down to him from his ancestors. In this exposition, the prisoner challenges notions of divine and free will in ways that resonate with Browning’s “Johannes Agricola”:

‘I knelt down beside my dead wife. But I knelt down not to pray. No: I cried unto God—if God there be—Thou madest me a madman! Thou madest me a murder! Thou foredoomest me to sin and hell! Thou, thou, the gracious God whom we mortals worship. There is the sacrifice! I have done thy will,—I have slain the most blissful of all thy creatures; am I a holy and commissioned priest or am I an accursed and infidel murderer?’ (598)

Here the madman claims to have carried out God's will through his murderous actions, as if the act itself was entirely against his own will. The notion that a divine hand shaped the will, actions, and context of the murder itself challenges the notion of agency within this context. The following passage best encapsulates the prisoner's thoughts on this matter:

'Father, you start at such words! You are not familiar with a madman's thoughts. Did I make this blood to boil so? Did I form this brain? Did I put this poison into my veins which flowed a hundred years since in that lunatic, my heroic ancestor? Had I not my being imposed, forced upon me, with all its red-rolling sea of dreams; and will you, a right and holy pious man, curse me because my soul was carried away by them as a ship is driven through the raging darkness of a storm?' (598)

Though the diction from this passage does not match that of Agricola precisely, the ontological implications align. Did the prisoner sin against god by committing this murder or was he preordained to do so because god created the "flawed" temperament that precipitated the actions? Through this framing narrative and the dramatic monologue form, Browning finds inspiration for the "Madhouse Cells."

Because the order of the two pieces switches from 1836 to 1842, it is unnecessary to read the two pieces as chronologically prefixed. To encapsulate them under the title "Madhouse Cells" suggests that Browning emphasized the thematic link between sanity and imprisonment. The rise of the mental sciences serves as cultural backdrop for anything invoking "madness," criminality, or asylums in the 1830s and 1840s. Contemporary readers would have been familiar with the realities of asylum life and of the often criminal repercussions of insanity. Literally, then, the notion of a "cell" would

have invoked images of prison, confinement, entrapment, etc. Though the title “Madhouse Cells” was removed in the 1860s, I think that it is important to consider initial interpretations of the works through this original pairing. By the 1860s, Victorian readers were accustomed to the dramatic monologue as a form and adept at reading them as psychological profiles. But in 1836 the form was unfamiliar—it confounded readers and critics alike and might have needed the didactic instruction of the title. Figuratively, at least during the works’ first few publications, since the two pieces constitute a confined thematic “cell,” they should be considered separate from the other poems around them and approached as inextricably linked.

The key to reading these two pieces as companion pieces also lies in the figurative interpretation of “cell,” or in this case, something that is completely closed to outside influence. “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” simultaneously offers an implied critique and endorsement of antinomianism, an extreme Calvinist doctrine of predestination. The endorsement of this concept is narrative, as Browning positions Agricola as of one of the “elect,” or chosen of God’s people, while the critique occurs through the reader’s interpretation. Building upon Langbaum’s contention that dramatic monologues position the reader as a “judge” of the content matter, in “Johannes Agricola,” the reader, acting as judge, moves beyond the persona’s sympathetic portrayal of antinomianism to Browning’s irony, which suggests that this extreme Calvinist doctrine has landed the speaker in the figurative “mad house.” Because Agricola is untrustworthy (or “mad”) from the beginning, the reader must therefore question all the content that is filtered through his perception. Though the persona claims he is “Guiltless for ever, like a tree /

That buds and blooms, nor seeks to know / The law by which it prospers so,” an ironic reading suggests that Browning calls attention to the arrogance embodied in such a perspective (lines 23-25).<sup>6</sup>

John Woolford examines some of the religious implications embedded within “Johannes Agricola in Meditation.” In support of the Browning’s condemnation of antinomianism—a general consensus among Browning scholars—Woolford outlines Browning’s strong background in Puritanism, particularly Milton. According to Woolford, Johannes represents the monologue of an “antinomian,” someone to whom God’s will has been utterly revealed. Because of this ultimate disclosure from God, human laws are not applicable to antinomians. As Woolford attests, “assured of his [Agricola’s] heavenly destination, he can afford to live it up on earth” (qtd. in Armstrong 31). Passages such as the following support this contention:

Yes, yes, a tree which must ascend,  
No poison-gourd foredoomed to stoop!  
I have God’s warrant, could I blend  
All hideous sins, as in a cup,  
To drink the mingled venoms up;  
Secure my nature will convert  
The draught to blossoming gladness fast:  
While sweet dews turn to the gourd’s hurt,  
And bloat, and while they bloat it, blast,  
As from the first its lot was cast. (lines 31-40)

In this section the arrogance of the antinomian position is clear; even if Agricola were to “drink the mingled venoms up,” his nature would “convert the draught to blossoming gladness.” Essentially, Agricola can do no wrong because he carries with him God’s

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<sup>6</sup> This version of “Johannes Agricola” is taken from Woolford and Karlin (334-337).

“warrant”; additionally, this assertion confirms Agricola’s definition of selfhood. His perceived allegiance with god suggests that his actions do not merely reflect god’s will, but, rather, that god actually dwells within his body. In Agricola’s estimation, the two entities are not separate, and, as indicated later in the poem, Browning’s treatment of the persona ironically questions this position.

Browning positions Agricola as looking down into hell and in doing so, suggests that his antinomian perspective considers the elect to be inseparable from the divine. In this section Agricola speaks from a voice that invokes God’s, perceiving in himself the power to absolve sin and observe hell’s wrath while remaining untouched by it:

For as I lie, smiled on, full-fed  
By unexhausted power to bless,  
I gaze below on hell’s fierce bed,  
And those its waves of flame oppress,  
Swarming in ghastly wretchedness;  
Whose life on earth aspired to be  
One altar-smoke, so pure! – to win  
If not love like God’s love for me,  
At least to keep his anger in;  
And all their striving turned to sin. (lines 41-50)

Ultimately, it is unclear whether or not Agricola is claiming to have the power to bless here. Given the past tense of the two successive adjectival clauses, it is difficult to ascertain who is doing the action. As Agricola is presumably lying down, he is “smiled on.” In this case, clearly God is the active agent who is doing the smiling. The ambiguity becomes apparent in the next clause, however, with “full-fed by unexhausted power to bless.” Is this clause again positioning God as the active agent who possesses the unexhausted power to bless and Agricola as “full-fed” from all the blessings, or,

rather, is this clause granting Agricola the active power of blessing because he is “smiled on?” A case for either scenario can be made, but given that the next lines overtly grant Agricola the power to observe “hell’s fierce bed,” it is likely that Agricola positions himself as one with the divine and therefore believes that he does in fact possess the power to bless.

This merging of Agricola and God conveys a stronger critique of the antinomian perception. The last lines of the poem bolster this critique by cataloguing all of those “undone,” or excluded from the elect. This list includes priests, nuns, doctors, hermits, acolytes, and even “incense-swinging” children; according to Agricola, all of these people were “undone / Before God fashioned star or sun,” a notion that complicates the doctrine of original sin and reinforces the determinism present in earlier sections of the poem. Agricola specifically takes issue with Catholicism in this catalogue, asking how anyone could “bargain for his [God’s] love, and stand, / Paying a price, at his right hand” (lines 59-60). The idea of “bargaining” for God’s love questions any doctrine suggesting that people earn their passage to heaven through good deeds on earth or time spent in the purgatorial afterlife. The fact that these “undone” people bargain for God’s love on one side while simultaneously paying the price of that love on the other conveys Agricola’s outlook on communion with and separation from the divine. Additionally, the attention given to predestination here questions an individual’s agency to act according to one’s free will. In the antinomian model of predestination, there seems to be no chance of acting outside of what has already been determined. The communion that Agricola claims also transcends suffering, suggesting that the “smiled upon” are absolved of their



earthly actions because they are, indeed, part of the divine from inception. It is this particular position that I feel informs the manners in which “Porphyria’s Lover,” the companion piece, should be read. By viewing the two works under this lens, one can make a compelling case for the two pieces representing an ideological cause and effect, with “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” presenting the cause and “Porphyria’s Lover” dramatizing the effect.

“Porphyria’s Lover,” originally entitled simply “Porphyria” arguably represents Browning’s most famous dramatic monologue. In some ways this work encompasses what Browning is best known for—the dramatic monologue form and a dark psychological element that feeds into the landscape of Victorian criminality. Many scholars have addressed this poem in some manner when discussing early manifestations of the dramatic monologue or Browning’s early career, though to date none have paired this infamous poem thematically with its companion piece. Using “Johannes Agricola” as a contextual frame, then, I propose to examine “Porphyria’s Lover” as an enactment and extension of its companion piece.

On the content level, this poem presents an account of the violent murder of a young girl. This reading of the work remains mostly unchallenged, though there is at least one scholar, Catherine Ross, who proposes that Browning’s unnamed narrator performs an act of erotic asphyxiation on Porphyria and that the young girl lives at the end of the work. I think a stronger case can be made for the murder narrative, especially given the tension between the active and passive elements of the poem’s first and second halves as well as the thematic link to “Johannes Agricola.” Using the previous analysis

suggesting that Browning critiques antinomianism through Agricola's monologue, I argue that the murderous persona in the second work violently enacts the antinomian arrogance only ideologically implied in the former.

The interpretation of the last line of "Porphyria's Lover" is paramount to my comparison here. After the unnamed narrator strangles Porphyria with her hair, the poem ends as follows: "And thus we sit together now, / And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word" (lines 58-60).<sup>7</sup> The invocation of God only at the end of the poem and the absence of any divine reproach throughout the monologue suggests a similar arrogance—or madness—to Agricola's. If Agricola presents the cerebral rationale for the antinomian position then Porphyria's murderer enacts the physical consequences resulting from such a position. Explaining Browning's possible critique in Agricola, here the reader experiences how the mind of a madman operates—both in interpretation and justification. Never is there mention of any type of censure in "Porphyria's Lover" until the last line. The persona narrates the entire interaction, supplying the reader with an almost god-like interpretation of Porphyria's desires, actions, etc. Then, after the murder has been committed and Porphyria lies dead, there is no divine sense of reprobation or regret. The persona, assuming a god-like power much like the one insinuated in Johannes Agricola, finds no moral barrier to his actions.

Perhaps god does not speak to the immoral actions because like Agricola, this persona believes he is one of the elect and can therefore do no wrong on earth. Here, Browning's critique is not so much about disingenuous claims to moral authority as it is

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<sup>7</sup> This version of "Porphyria's Lover" is taken from Woolford and Karlin (329-331).

about the absence of believing moral authority is necessary at all. For the antinomian, the question of moral authority is irrelevant because god's will and the elect's will are conjoined—even to the extent of justifying murder. The fact that the murderer feels no regret about his actions demonstrates his disregard of any type of moral guidance. The murderous persona does not hear god speak because he is completely separate from any contact with god. Reading this position back onto Agricola, the reader can then assume the same for that character. Though Agricola claims to be in communion with the divine, he is also completely deluded about his assumed position. Both of these personas are mad men, locked inside a cell of belief that presumes them outside the moral consequences of god. Their definitions of selfhood encompass two distinct influences (their sentient bodies and god's divinity), suggesting that an “essential” separate self cannot exist. From this vantage point, these personas cannot act according to their own agency, as their will is inseparable from god's will. However, Browning's ironic treatment of these characters questions both their perceived allegiance to god and, implicitly, their actions. Here, the dramatic monologue form allows Browning to explore issues dealing with a divided self, agency, and, ultimately, culpability in material reality, while also critiquing antinomianism.

### **Karshish, The Arab Physician's Account of Lazurus and Divine Embodiment**

Browning's *Men and Women* (1855) contains “An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician,”<sup>8</sup> another key poem that informs

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<sup>8</sup> See Woolford and Karlin (552-572).

this study of a divided sense of self and personal agency. Unlike the monologues in “Madhouse Cells,” however, this poem addresses the issue of culpability more directly. In the first monologues, Browning implies that the antinomian divine allegiance could negate culpability in material reality, but Karshish discusses these implications more overtly through Lazarus’s resurrection. Thematically, then, I position this poem as a link between “Madhouse Cells” and Guido’s monologues in *The Ring and the Book*, where issues of culpability become paramount. Here the dramatic monologue is conveyed through the written word, rather than speaking, because the poem assumes an epistolary form, with Karshish writing of his experiences to Abib, his mentor. Ostensibly, these experiences recount a version of the resurrection of the biblical Lazarus of Bethany. In the first stanza, the introduction of sorts to the epistle, Karshish describes himself as “the picker-up of learning’s crumbs.” By way of an introduction to his persona, he writes:

Karshish, the picker-up of learning’s crumbs,  
 The not-incurious in God’s handiwork  
 (This man’s-flesh he hath admirably made,  
 Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,  
 To coop up and keep down on earth a space  
 That puff of vapour from his mouth, man’s soul). (lines 1-6)

In these lines, Browning returns to the origins of selfhood that first appear in “Madhouse Cells.” Here, Browning positions god as the designer of all creation with omniscient power. The notion of “cooping up” men’s souls on earth reinforces this degree of control. By describing man’s soul as a “puff of vapour from his [God’s] mouth,” Browning reasserts the communion between human and divine, though in a different context than antinomianism. The human soul is made from the immortal breath, which

reinforces the bubble blowing image presented a few lines before. This fusion between the human and divine frames the remainder of the poem and provides points of comparison for the ideas of free will, determinism, and agency.

The poem continues by recounting a fictional version of the story of Lazarus of Bethany's resurrection. In Karshish's narrative, Lazarus is described in the beginning as a "man with plague-sores in the third degree / Runs till he drops down dead" (lines 37-38). Though there is no biblical account that corroborates Browning's characterization of Lazarus's sickness, the Arab physician positions the victim as likely having leprosy, and, a few lines later, "mania," which was "subinduced by epilepsy." This diagnosis, arguably because it is historically unaccounted for, invokes Victorian attitudes that elevated the scientific and deemphasized the religious regarding illnesses. Richard Altick suggests that this poem represents a satiric commentary on the various psychological and scientific practices that aligned against traditional Christianity in the mid-century, which implies a comic thread. However, despite its comedic moments, Karshish tackles serious questions in terms of selfhood and the divine. Recalling the framing lines that positioned man's soul as "vapour" from the mouth of god, Browning continues to explore this notion for the remainder of the poem.

In terms of biblical or historical contexts, the story of Lazarus offers the only other human—in addition to the resurrection of Jesus himself—to die and then be resurrected from the dead. Therefore, this story provides an apt frame for Browning's query into selfhood and the divine. The following includes Karshish's description of the resurrection to Abib:

And first—the man’s own firm convictions rests  
 That he was dead (in fact they buried him)  
 --That he was dead and then restored to life  
 By a Nazarene physician of his tribe:  
 ‘Sayeth, the same bade ‘Rise,’ and he did rise.  
 ‘Such cases are diurnal,’ thou wilt cry.  
 Not so this figment!—not, that such a fume,  
 Instead of giving way to time and health,  
 Should eat itself into the life of life,  
 As saffron tingeth flesh, blood, bones and all!  
 For see, how he takes up the after-life. (lines 97-106)

As Karshish describes the resurrection to Abib, he states that Lazarus held “firm convictions” that “he was dead (in fact they buried him) / -That he was dead and then restored to life / by a Nazarene physician of his tribe: / ‘ Sayeth, the same bade ‘Rise,’ and he did rise” (lines 97-101). Then in a move that anticipates an objection from Abib through the means of a rhetorical question, Karshish’s persona invokes the earlier “vapour” image by stating “not, that such a fume, / Instead of giving way to time and health, / Should eat itself into the life of life, / As saffron tingeth flesh, blood, bones and all!” (lines 103-106). The surprise uttered here is in response to the resurrection, the coming back from death imbued with a restored sense of the divine. This is the facet of the poem with which Karshish seems most fascinated. The performance of the miracle obviously informs the poem, but the miracle itself is not the focus of the poem.

Langbaum argues that Browning’s religious monologues defend Christianity empirically by positing a question that can only be answered through the conditions that the poem supplies. In the case of Karshish, then, the conditions of the poem are built upon the assumption of a miracle, from a perspective outside of Christianity—i.e. how can Lazarus of Bethany be resurrected from the dead? According to Langbaum, the reader then

answers this question through the Christian mythos (98). Because the epistolary dialogue of the poem itself focuses on the ramifications of Lazarus's divine resurrection and expresses incredulity at the notion of the holy trinity, however, this poem emphasizes more than just an apologist stance.

Karshish dwells upon the notion of divine embodiment for both Lazarus and "the Nazarene" for a significant section of the poem. When first presented with Lazarus he conveys the man's peace of mind and calm demeanor, but he deems Lazarus's understanding of the world "knowledge," an obviously weighty symbol within the Christian mythos. He articulates the duality of this acquired knowledge as follows:

He [Lazarus] holds on firmly to some thread of life—  
(It is the life to lead perforce)  
Which runs across some vast distracting orb  
Of glory on either side that meager thread,  
Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet—  
The spiritual life around the earthly life:  
The law of that is known to him as this,  
His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.  
So is the man perplexed with impulses  
Sudden to start off crosswise, not straight on,  
Proclaiming what is right and wrong across,  
And not along, this black thread through the blaze—  
'It should be' balked by 'here it cannot be.' (lines 178-190)

The image here that Browning via Karshish evokes is significant, as it equates the "orb of glory," the "knowledge" that Lazarus has acquired of the spiritual life, as surrounding the earth on either side of the thread. Spatially positioning the earth between the two poles of spiritual enlightenment so that it is completely surrounded and yet contained reinforces the idea of "cooping" up men's souls that appears in the first segment of the poem. The

embodied duality separates Lazarus's heart and brain, which both reside in the spiritual realm, from his feet, which are planted on the earth. The connective tissue, so to speak, involves the origin of man's "impulses." Returning to issues first introduced in "Madhouse Cells," this poem questions how Lazarus navigates these impulses while he is simultaneously both human and aligned with the divine. The fact that Karshish positions "right and wrong" across a "thread and blaze," with two competing directives ("it should be" and "here it cannot be") suggests a relativistic position concerning morality. In this design, there does not seem to be an absolute definition of right and wrong that universally applies; rather, there seems to be a continuum of "rights" and "wrongs" that change by degree along this "thread."

The next section reinforces the importance of this divine embodiment and also directly addresses notions of culpability:

And oft the man's soul springs into his face  
As if he saw again and heard again  
His sage that bade him 'Rise' and he did rise.  
Something, a word, a tick o' the blood within  
Admonishes: then back he sinks at once  
To ashes, who was very fire before,  
In sedulous recurrence to his trade  
Whereby he earneth him the daily bread;  
And studiously the humbler for that pride,  
Professedly the faultier that he knows  
God's secret, while he holds the thread of life.  
Indeed the especial marking of the man  
Is prone submission to the heavenly will—  
Seeing it, what it is, and why it is. (lines 191-204)

Karshish speaks of Lazarus's soul "springing" to his face when "something" or a "tick of the blood" rises and bids him do something. Though it seems that the impulse is



transitory for Lazarus, in this configuration of the self, the “blood” somehow governs the actions of the man. This conclusion recalls the question first presented in “Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary”: who controls the impulses of the self? Is it the mental (the brain), the physical, or some element of the divine? The implications of such questions directly speak to how society determines culpability. Who is ultimately responsible for one’s actions? Browning’s dramatic monologues that explore selfhood, determinism, and agency complicate these ideas. If god dwells within the souls of the elect (a slippery term to be sure) and one of the elect does something heinous (as in the case of Porphyria’s lover and, later, Guido) then where does the culpability reside? With man? With God? The cultural and theological ramifications of such questions manifest in both religious and judicial realms. A little over a decade after *Men and Women*, Browning revisits many of these issues in *The Ring and the Book*, which dramatizes the story of Guido Franceschini’s brutal murder of his young wife, Pompilia, and her parents. Through a framing device that utilizes many dramatic monologues in order to explore the temporal and relativistic variants of the “truth” in a court case, Browning also addresses some of the same questions that he first attempted to examine in “Madhouse Cells.”

### **Guido and Culpability in *The Ring and the Book***

Published later in Browning’s career, *The Ring and the Book* conveys its narrative through multiple dramatic monologues written in blank verse from distinct perspectives. Guido’s character is the only one who speaks twice throughout the poem, signifying that Browning emphasized Guido’s perspective, even if the poet ultimately undercuts Guido’s

claims by condemning him to death. In the following analysis, I will demonstrate how Guido's monologues make claims similar to Agricola in terms of a divine allegiance; in terms of culpability, Guido's monologues resonate with both Porphyria's lover and Karshish's thoughts on Lazarus. In essence, Guido's character embodies all of the questions regarding selfhood, agency, and culpability that my previous sections address, but with greater emphasis on the judicial consequences and context. To begin this discussion, it is worth noting some of the striking similarities between Browning's first dramatic monologues and his work with the form in *The Ring and the Book*. He framed "Madhouse Cells" around the story of a "madman" who was being held in a cell, awaiting death, for brutally stabbing his young wife. Some thirty years later, he revisits similar circumstances through the characters of Guido and Pompilia. As Book I reveals, Browning found his source inspiration for *The Ring and the Book* in an account of the court records in a "square old yellow Book," which he found in Florence. Though *The Ring and the Book* is a much more complex work than "Madhouse Cells," some of the similarities in content are striking. In Book I, the persona (which most critics agree represents a voice very close to Browning's own) attributes his discovery of the yellow book to a predestined motion orchestrated by the divine. He writes:

Examine it yourselves! I found this book,  
Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just,  
(Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,  
Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,  
One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm,  
Across a Square in Florence, crammed with booths . . . (lines 38-43).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This version of *The Ring and the Book* is edited by Richard D. Altick and Thomas J. Collins.

Through these lines Browning invokes the notion of predestination in the very origin of the poem itself—both in the lines but also through the manner in which he came across the book. In some respects, the reader knows from the beginning that this work is being represented as divinely inspired, and holding true to its origins, this narrative revolves around questions concerning the convergence and separations between the human and the divine.

Perhaps the most efficient path into this discussion of *The Ring and the Book* and questions of the divine influence in selfhood is through careful consideration of the first monologue of Count Guido Franceschini, because Guido's claims about culpability and judgment are the most relevant to my argument. In relation to "Madhouse Cells," Guido's character seems to represent a conflation of the attitudes expressed in the earlier work. He reflects the views of both Porphyria's lover (as a murderer) and Agricola, because Guido had taken minor vows earlier in his life and claims the kind of divine privilege that Agricola espouses in his monologue. Guido's first monologue explores the notions of divine embodiment, impulse origins, and culpability, particularly on the material level. Browning approaches this monologue with an ironic distance that is both mocking and indicting; however, given his sustained interest in this character type, it also makes sense to read Guido's argumentation and self-presentation sincerely, though obviously morally flawed. Additionally, Guido is the only character that speaks twice, through two dramatic monologues, Book V and Book XI. Recalling Browning's words that Mason cites as evidence of the psychological exploration in the dramatic monologues, Guido's character emerges the quintessential model of a "monster"; but, as

Browning directs, “those who carry their researches into the moral nature of mankind, cannot do better than impress on their minds, at the outset, that in the regions they explore, they are to expect no monsters—no essentially discordant termination to any ‘mulier Formosa superne.’” This passage offers one way that we should approach Guido, with an eye towards understanding his rationale and his “madness.”

Early in his monologue, Guido openly avows that he killed Pompilia and her parents; he never makes any pretense to the contrary on that point. However, given that he makes this statement early in the monologue, his presumed innocence or guilt never stems from a question of whether or not he carried out the murder itself. The question of culpability—punishment by the law in the material world—rests upon the circumstances of why he was induced to commit such a brutal crime. In order to examine how Browning positions Guido as both a victim of circumstance and also as a morally deficient character, I will first analyze some prominent passages in the early part of the monologue and then conduct a more sustained analysis of the last third of Guido’s speech. Shortly after announcing his guilt in committing the murders, Guido launches into the circumstances and the narrative that led him down this course. Addressing the Court in his trial, he announces:

I’ the name of the indivisible Trinity!  
Will my lords, in the plenitude of their light,  
Weigh well that all this trouble has come on me  
Through my persistent treading in the paths  
Where I was trained to go,--wearing that yoke  
My shoulder was predestined to receive,  
Born to the hereditary stoop and crease? (lines 121-27)

Here, the first line, which invokes the “indivisible Trinity” establishes a frame through which Guido launches his defense. Though he ostensibly calls on the name of the divine to bolster his position and speech, by invoking the Trinity and then following that invocation with diction such as “trained,” “yoke,” and “predestined,” Guido introduces a line of argument that fuses his identity, impulses, and actions to a course of divine will. The notion of the indivisible Trinity operates both to invoke the name of God and also to reinforce the idea of divine embodiment. Throughout the monologue, Guido claims to be carrying out God’s will—not because God, as a separate and reigning entity, orders him to do these actions, but rather because Guido himself represents a sentient embodiment of the divine itself. In this manner, Guido aligns himself with the holy Trinity so that the opening invocation serves both to introduce and reinforce his divine connection. The invocation of Trinity emphasizes the divided sense of self that Browning stresses in all of these characters.

Eventually, Guido claims that anyone who is against him is also against god; he accomplishes this by setting god’s law and man’s law in opposition to each other. A definitive shift in the middle of the monologue marks this section:

Why, that I am alive, am still a man  
With brain and heart and tongue and right-hand too—  
Nay, even with friends, in such a cause as this,  
To right me if I fail to take my right.  
No more of law; a voice beyond the law  
Enters my heart, *Quis est pro Domino?* (lines 1544-49)

The shift that is important to note here deals with a claim to move beyond the law—the material law—in accordance with a divine voice which enters Guido’s “heart.” In this

context, Guido positions the heart as something separate from the brain, though he aligns them a few lines prior. The divine voice within the heart asks “who is on the Lord’s side,” which alludes to the famous question that Moses speaks in Exodus 32.26. Upon coming down from Mount Sinai, Moses finds the Israelites he had left behind worshipping the golden calf. Angry at the idol worship, Moses asks those who claim to be on the Lord’s side to slay those who did not answer the call, which would involve slaying their brothers, sisters, etc. I mention this connection to Exodus because this is the alignment that Guido invokes in his explanation of the murder of Pompilia and her parents. Like the Levites who slayed their kin—ostensibly at God’s bidding—Guido also carries out what he deems as God’s will by murdering his deceptive wife and in-laws. The following lines (1597, 1608) that characterize the murders as the “dread duty” supports this position.

The remainder of Guido’s monologue invokes various religious narratives and utilizes religious diction that reinforces the divine allegiance that Guido presumes. At times, Guido claims to be acting outside of consciousness—driven by an innate force that obscures his individual will. For instance, when relating their journey to Rome, he states:

I have no memory of our way,  
Only that, when at intervals the cloud  
Of horror about me opened to let in life,  
I listened to some song in the ear, some snatch  
Of a legend, relic of religion, stray  
Fragment of record very strong and old  
Of the first conscience, the anterior right,  
The God’s-gift to mankind, impulse to quench  
The antagonistic spark of hell and tread  
Satan and all his malice into dust,  
Declare to the world the one law, right is right. (lines 1568-78)

Guido invokes a tone of helplessness here, a person lost in the “cloud of horror.” When he finally arrives in Rome, he constructs the lines passively, with “I found myself, as on the wings of winds, / Arrived: I was in Rome on Christmas Eve” (lines 1580-81). To say that he “found” himself “arrived,” suggests that he was not intentionally going. By placing the onus of action onto a divine force residing within his “heart,” Guido also attempts to reassign culpability. He did not consciously ride to Rome in order to kill his wife; a divine force directed him in these circumstances. After he kills Pompilia and her parents, officers of the law find him sleeping calmly with the blood still on his arms and his response is: “Wherefore not? Why, how else should I be found? / I was my own self, had my sense again, / My soul safe from the serpents. I could sleep” (lines 1676-78). Here the idea of the restoring one’s senses works in concert with the previous displacement of agency. Once the murders had been carried out and Guido’s soul made safe from the “serpents” (a reiteration of the spark of hell and Satan references above), he was again his “own self” and had his own senses. God’s will had been done and, subsequently, he had been restored his sense of self.

Guido’s purpose in his entire monologue is to persuade the court to be lenient in his punishment. After he has excused his crimes by way of divine sanction, he speaks again to the issues of culpability in the material world. Towards the end of Book V, Guido invokes an interesting verbal strategy by “reclaiming” a healthy body that should live in order to further serve God. Reinforcing his presumed allegiance with the divine, Guido utilizes the “Great Physician” healing analogy to bolster his case. In an effort to absolve himself, Guido claims he is “cured” from an illness:

Let me begin to live again. I did  
God's bidding and man's duty, so, breathe free;  
Look you to the rest! I heard Himself prescribe,  
That great Physician, and dared lance the core  
Of the bad ulcer; and the rage abates,  
I am myself and whole now: I prove cured  
By the eyes that see, the ears that hear again,  
The limbs that have relearned their youthful play,  
The healthy taste of food and feel of clothes  
And taking to our common life once more,  
All that now urges my defence from death. (lines 1702-1712)

This specific verbal move speaking to healing his body enacts yet another manner in which Guido connects himself to the divine. Now that the “ulcer,” (Pompilia and her parents) has been lanced, Guido's body—the one that encompasses God—is now “whole” again and ready to continue living out God's plan. In reference to this “whole” new body, Guido ends his monologue by invoking both Christ's resurrection and the Father/Son aspect of the Trinity in an attempt to escape the punishment of death.

Alluding to Acts 2.34, Guido addresses his son as if in the future:

Then will I set my son at my right-hand  
And tell his father's story to this point,  
Adding 'The task seemed superhuman, still  
I dared and did it, trusting God and law:  
And they approved of me: give praise to both!'  
And if, for answer, he shall stoop to kiss  
My hand, and peradventure start thereat,--  
I engage to smile 'That was an accident  
I' the necessary process,--just a trip  
O' the torture-irons in their search for truth,--  
Hardly misfortune, and no fault at all.' (lines 2047-58)

The allusion to Acts involves sitting his son at his right hand. In this section of the New Testament, Peter recounts David's prophecy that after Christ's resurrection, his flesh is



healed and, sitting exalted at God's right hand with the promise of the Holy Ghost, Jesus becomes both "Lord and Christ." The sermon ends by emphasizing that the bodily harm inflicted by the crucifixion led to the resurrection, which, in turn, solidified the apotheosis of the man. Extracting the essence of this Biblical passage, then, the crucifixion of the earthly body led to the apotheosis of the soul. By invoking this allusion, Guido finally, definitively, claims a divine embodiment on par with that of the Trinity. The reference that he makes to the marks on his hands mirrors the image of Christ's scars from the crucifixion. Given this connection, then, the tone that Guido employs at the monologue's end attempts to reenact divine forgiveness. Aligning himself with Christ, Guido equates the Romans who crucified Jesus to the Romans sitting in the present courtroom, who tortured Guido during the course of his incarceration. Just as Jesus forgave his tormentors, Guido presumes to do the same with his torturers/executioners. In this ultimate displacement of culpability, Guido assumes a divine right that redresses the court as the murderers of Christ, a powerful indictment in the Roman Catholic Church.

Returning to the issue of culpability, Guido is ultimately executed for his actions. Despite his best efforts to invoke a divine allegiance and attempt to absolve himself, he meets his demise in the end, but not without a lengthy and increasingly desperate closing monologue. After he receives his death sentence, Guido once again addresses the court and entreats them for "blood-sympathy":

I do adjure you, help me, Sirs! My blood  
comes from as far a source: ought it to end  
This way, by leakage through their scaffold-planks  
Into Rome's sink where her red refuse runs?  
Sirs, I beseech you by blood-sympathy. (lines 15-19)

In this context, Guido appeals to other nobleman, asking the court to respect his heritage so that his noble blood will not be spilled to seep through the hangman's scaffold.

Throughout this last monologue, Guido attempts to gain sympathy by any means possible—through his nobility, a divine allegiance to god, his right as a husband, and, finally, an appeal to Pompilia herself. Though his emotional state vacillates, he never fully assumes responsibility for his actions, despite the fact that he does not dispute his part in the murders. Browning's portrayal of Guido as a condemned man vainly searching for any line of defense communicates the poet's moral disapproval of Guido's crimes. The first monologue positions Guido as an arrogant figure, but not as a desperate one, and therefore it is difficult for the reader to judge whether Guido's character truly believes in his own innocence or if he is simply arguing for his life. The last monologue, however, demonstrates the latter.

Above all else, Guido advocates for his life through any available means, including aligning his impending execution with Christ's crucifixion, and the Catholic leaders with the devil:

What saintly act is done in Rome to-day  
But might be prompted by the devil,--"is"  
I say not,--"has been, and again may be,--"  
I do say, full i' the face o' the crucifix  
You try to stop my mouth with! Off with it! (lines 605-609)

Here, Guido stops short of openly comparing the clergy to the devil, but only just. His tone becomes increasingly desperate as the monologue progresses, and eventually Guido claims that he will face god with this claim: "I am one huge and sheer mistake,--whose

fault? / Not mine at least, who did not make myself" (lines 939-940). The final lines of the monologue convey Guido's most "honest" words:

Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,  
Is---save me notwithstanding! Life is all!  
I was just stark mad,--let the madman live  
Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!  
Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours,  
I am the Granduke's--no, I am the Pope's!  
Abate,--Cardinal,--Christ,--Maria,--God,...  
Pompilia, will you let them murder me? (lines 2420-2427)

At the end, he simply begs for mercy, even a life in chains, and admits that he was "stark mad." It seems that Browning ultimately positions Guido as a devious and arrogant rhetorician who will claim anything in order to save his own life. By connecting Guido's monologue with those presented some thirty years earlier in "Madhouse Cells," I can draw some comparisons. Porphyria's lover is not punished—at least not to the reader's knowledge and Agricola remains locked in a dialogue outside of material reality. Guido's eventual condemnation and punishment delivers Browning's final thought on the issue. In the end, Browning advocates for judicial culpability in material reality. Indeed, it would be difficult to advocate for anything other than Guido's execution.

In closing, these monologues address issues of a divided sense of self, agency, and culpability in a variety of manners. The form of the dramatic monologue provides an aesthetic method that addresses these questions implicitly because of the multiple influences on the speaking self. Concerns of agency and culpability become a logical extension to essential and divided configurations of selfhood, and Browning's exploration of these notions serve as a foundation for the following incarnations of this

aesthetic genre. The next chapter focuses on Sarah Piatt's polyvocal lyrics, which I position as a variant of the dramatic monologue genre. Given that issues of agency are central to the genre, Piatt's polyvocal lyrics attempt to establish the ability to grieve openly within postbellum American consolation culture. Rather than filtering her lyrics through one unified persona, as Browning does in his dramatic monologues, Piatt incorporates several separate voices that express oppositional positions. In doing so, she explicitly reveals the irony that the genre entails. In my concluding chapter, I return to Book XII of Browning's *The Ring and the Book* in order to discuss briefly his endorsement of an artistic truth that transcends relative truth. By drawing some comparisons with Eliot's endorsement of art, I suggest in the conclusion that the dramatic monologue evolved into a polyvocal approach as an attempt to express a more accurate representation of a contingent reality, which, in turn, reflects a fluid and contingent definition of self.

### CHAPTER III

#### “WE CHANGE ITS NAME TO HEAVEN. THAT MAKES IT TRUE”: THE AGENCY TO GRIEVE IN SARAH PIATT’S POLYVOCAL LYRICS

Who have believed in it? Why all the men  
In all the world—and all the women, too.  
Because it so pleasant to believe in:  
There are so many pretty things to do,  
Such light to laugh and dance in; yes, and then  
Such lonesome, rainy woods for one to grieve in.  
--Sarah Piatt, “Keeping the Faith” (lines 13-18)<sup>1</sup>

The excerpt above aptly characterizes the attitude towards death that I address within American postbellum consolation culture. This attitude minimizes the harrowing toll that grief takes upon the living, and, rather, emphasizes a rewarding afterlife that aligns with the Christian telos of heaven. Along with many of her other poems, Sarah Piatt’s “Keeping the Faith” challenges this genteel conception of grief and, rather, focuses on death’s material loss. This chapter demonstrates how Sarah Piatt’s poetry carves out a space for the living to grieve openly when faced with the death of a loved one. Building upon the previous chapter’s claims, I position Piatt’s call and response dialogue poems as an evolution of the dramatic monologue in that they explicitly render the ironic voice that is only implicit in Browning. While Browning’s poetry highlights problems of agency and culpability by challenging the notion of an essential self, Piatt’s polyvocal approach deconstructs tenets of consolation culture in search of the agency to

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<sup>1</sup> All of Piatt’s poems in this chapter are taken from Paula Bennett’s *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. For “Keeping the Faith,” see Bennett (69).

grieve. Rather than writing through one unified persona, Piatt writes with two or more voices that engage in conversations. Because of this stylistic approach, Piatt's poetry serves as an ideal bridge between Browning's and Eliot's styles. Her poetry incorporates two voices into the Victorian dramatic monologue, which anticipates the many voices that comprise Eliot's Modernist polyvocal aesthetic.

Given that questions of agency are implicit to the genre of the dramatic monologue, they also emerge in Piatt's lyrics. Browning explores agency and free will through both religious and legal contexts in his dramatic monologues. Piatt explores issues of agency and free will through American genteel consolation literature. Consolation literature occupied a large space in late nineteenth-century America, especially regarding the loss of children. Tropes of the departed turning into angels and cherubs abound in genteel poetry, which deemphasizes the palpable grief experienced by the bereaved. Using familiar genteel poetic diction and forms, Piatt emphasizes the harsher aspects of death in material reality. Her poems challenge cultural and religious tenets suggesting that comfort arrives after death in the form of heaven. For Piatt, these platitudes are insufficient in the face of such material loss, and humans have no agency to circumvent this inevitable tragedy. This characterization of a cruel deterministic landscape aligns with American Realism, which emphasizes the trials of material life over any potential rewards in an afterlife. Indeed, Piatt's poetry often questions heaven's very existence, concentrating rather on the limitations of earthly existence. She dramatizes events such as funerals by metonymically replacing the departed with fanciful symbols such as dolls, fairies, and saints, which align with genteel poetic tropes.

However, her treatment of these symbols suggests that the metonymic humans contain almost as little agency as their symbolic constructs, acting only as pawns in a pre-determined game. Tracing these symbols, this chapter examines Piatt's commentary on human agency to grieve within a seemingly deterministic reality. This emphasis on the material aspects of death and mourning demonstrates that Piatt's postbellum poetry thematically reinforces American Realist tropes, and though her poetry utilizes elements of genteel diction and rhythm, her irony actually undercuts the genteel consolation culture with which critics have associated her.

### **A Place for Poetry within American Realism**

In the last fifteen years, several scholars have addressed a critical gap that exists between American Realism and genteel poetry, including Paula Bennett and Cheryl Walker.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on the magazine and print culture of the late nineteenth century has also answered this call.<sup>2</sup> Yet there is still critical work to be done on postbellum poetry in order to gain a more historically nuanced understanding of how both fiction and poetry engaged with what we now deem American literary Realism. This chapter seeks, in part, to reconcile this critical gap by analyzing Sarah Piatt's postbellum poetry using some of the same criteria that defines the prized fiction of the period. Having previously

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of American women's poetry in the nineteenth-century, see Paula Bennett's *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry 1800-1900* and Cheryl Walker's *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900*.

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew Giordano's "'A Lesson From' the Magazines: Sarah Piatt and the Postbellum Periodical Poet." (23-51). Also see Mary Loeffelholz's *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry*.

examined how Robert Browning used the dramatic monologue and irony to question agency in an essential self, I now trace his influence to the postbellum American scene. As Yopie Prins acknowledges, the Brownings were wildly popular in the United States during the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Sarah Piatt was certainly a fan of the Brownings, Robert Browning in particular, and some reviewers even accuse Piatt of “go[ing] the way of Browningism,” which was not intended as a compliment.<sup>4</sup> In exploring this transatlantic connection, I argue that, much like her British predecessor, Sarah Piatt utilizes polyvocality and irony to question the unified self and the agency to grieve within postbellum consolation culture.

It is questionable whether or not most of Piatt’s contemporary readership viewed her poetry with the ironic edge that many scholars now agree is present in her work. Paula Bennett, the scholar almost solely responsible for recovering Piatt in the early 1990s, compares Piatt’s ironic tendencies to Emily Dickinson’s approach by stating that Piatt is so subtle a writer as “to make Emily Dickinson look like she wields a two-by-four.”<sup>5</sup> With a tone that in her more restrained moments playfully pushes genteel boundaries, Piatt, in her brazen unrestrained moments, caustically derides such sacrosanct paradigms as heaven and divine will. Her irony and multi-voice conversations bitterly undermine genteel religious ideology, especially regarding the agency to grieve openly.

In order to place Piatt’s work in historical context, it is first necessary to understand the critical assessment of postbellum poetry in general. E. C. Stedman’s well-

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the Brownings’ popularity in America, see Yopie Prins “Robert Browning, Transported by Meter.” (205-231).

<sup>4</sup> See the review in Bennett’s Introduction to *Palace-Burner* (xxx).

<sup>5</sup> See Bennet’s Introduction to *Palace-Burner* (xxxv).



known adage about the period's poetry succinctly characterizes the conventional critical attitude: "We have a twilight interval, with minor voices and their tentative modes and tones" (xxviii). Though obviously biased, Stedman's assessment assumes a more generous attitude than much of the scholarship that postdates it. Roy Harvey Pearce claims that during this period "American poetry had relapsed into a half-life" (253), while Jay Parini grants very little attention to the poetry of these decades in his more recent account of the history of American poetry.<sup>6</sup> Less favorably still, Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia characterize postbellum poetry as "a poetry of willfully dissociated sensibility; its odor was distinctly one of mildewed and dusty old books. The library needed proper ventilating, but these poets didn't know it, and would never know it" (13-14). With less vitriol, David Perkins portrays genteel poetry as a "refuge" from the harsh realities of a landscape torn by war and reconstruction. In contrast to how he characterizes comparable British poetry, he describes postbellum American poetics as "an imprisoning stock conception of what poetry should be" (beautiful, elevating, refined, traditional, and ideal), and, still more important, of what it should not be (vulgar, homespun, idiosyncratic, realistic, deflating). The role of this poetry was to maintain the "'spiritual' side of life" (95). Perkins's definition of genteel spirituality becomes particularly important when read alongside of Piatt's poetry, for it is exactly this type of ideology that she challenges. She is neither genteel by Perkins's standards nor minor in Stedman's terms. Both prolific and complex, she battles idyllic genteel consolation culture on its own literary grounds.

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<sup>6</sup> See Jay Parini (ix-xxx).

In the landscape of American Realism, fiction has traditionally been the subject of the dominant criticism. Outside of Whitman and Dickinson studies (who are generally positioned as protomodernists), few postbellum poets have received adequate critical attention. From just a cursory survey of scholarship, one might be inclined to think that no one wrote poetry other than Whitman and Dickinson during the late nineteenth century, an assumption that is ill-informed. There were in fact many postbellum poets writing in America; indeed, many of the well-known fiction writers of the time also wrote poetry, including William Dean Howells, Henry James, Kate Chopin, Steven Crane, and Edith Wharton. In the cases of those named above, their poetic works have been passed over in favor of their fiction. Elizabeth Renker addresses this critical oversight in her “‘I Looked Again and Saw’: Teaching Postbellum Realist Poetry.” Renker defines American realist poetry according to two primary features: that the poetry attempts to represent or recreate the “real” much like the fiction of the era and also that realist poetry resists conventions of the romantic and the sentimental.<sup>7</sup> While scholars have leveled negative critiques at postbellum poetry, the period’s fiction has been heralded as some of the most insightful and prescient of American literary history. Consequently, before diving into an analysis of Piatt’s poetry, I should catalogue—and call into question—some of the more general characteristics that have historically defined American realism.

As Donald Pizer aptly discusses, the critical debates questioning the definitions of American Realism are fraught. Literary history often traces the origins of Realism to

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<sup>7</sup> Though helpful, this essay mainly focuses on pedagogical approaches to teaching Realist poetry rather than analyzing the poetry alongside of the fiction in the period. See Elizabeth Renker (82-92).

France in the 1850s to 1880s, as a movement that evolved from a set of stylistic approaches and ideologies from writers such as Flaubert and Zola. In America, however, realism is bound by the Civil War and World War I respectively, a chronological frame that emphasizes temporal historical events rather than a cohesive structure of ideologies for understanding the movement.<sup>8</sup> This temporal distinction makes American Realism difficult to define critically, as there are many “realisms” to reconcile, according to Elizabeth Ammons.<sup>9</sup> Within this fraught literary understanding, there is also a distinct tendency to disregard. It is disconcerting to read entire compendiums of criticism and not see one poet or poem mentioned. This omission seems to be unique to the scholarship on American Realism as well, for despite the popularity of the Victorian novel, few address the Victorian period without including the Brownings, Meredith, Tennyson, Arnold, the Rossettis, and, later, Swinburne. Why, then, does canonical criticism about American Realism exclude poetry almost entirely?

Michael Anesko provides an apt and succinct survey of the critical history of American Realism, openly acknowledging that any genre other than fiction has become increasingly marginalized in the past thirty years. He posits “the novel has become the normative focus of critical attention to realism and naturalism. One might even say that genre and mode have become coterminous, not merely in practice but also in ideological conception” (78). Anesko maintains that one early and consistent critical approach to American Realism is the attempt to contain social commentary and critique within the

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<sup>8</sup> For a broader discussion of the differences between European realism and American realism, see Donald Pizer’s Introduction (1-18).

<sup>9</sup> See Elizabeth Ammons “Expanding the Cannon of American Realism” (435-455).

fiction. Both feminist and Marxist critics have found American Realism to be fertile ground for those methodologies.<sup>10</sup> Faced with a growing commodity market for various literary genres, late nineteenth-century novelists both resisted and reinscribed what some cultural critics would categorize as problematic social conditions ingrained with hierarchical structures favoring the growing bourgeois class in the United States. Amy Kaplan argues, “realistic novels have trouble ending because they pose problems they cannot solve, problems that stem from their attempt to imagine and contain social change.”<sup>11</sup> Equally contentious, the advent of deconstructionism and poststructuralist criticism calls into question the efficacy of the category of realism because of the instability of language, sign, and referent. How can something be “real” in such an unstable forum?

Most contemporary critics agree that the best methodology for determining realism includes historical contextualization. Anesko concludes his account of realist critical approaches by stating, “Historical recontextualization is perhaps one way to escape from the prison-house of language (de)constructed by so much poststructuralist theory” (90). I would add to this insightful approach that in order to understand the complex interplay of literary texts, reception, and the cultural interchanges produced through those interactions, literary scholarship needs to redefine the period using more nuanced criteria. Comparing commonalities from disparate literary genres will provide a broader and more accurate portrait of the postbellum literary and cultural landscape.

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<sup>10</sup> For a more nuanced discussion of the critical trend in American realism, see Michael Anesko (77-94).

<sup>11</sup> See Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism* (160).

Nancy Glazener addresses some of these issues in her *Reading for Realism*, which exposes some of the hierarchies embedded in the canon formation of American Realism. Toril Moi speaks of the late nineteenth century, generally, as a period of anti-uplift literature. Whereas literature of the early nineteenth century was often viewed as vehicle to fortify and enrich individuals, and by extension, society, Moi positions the literature of the later part of the century as doing just the opposite. The fact that Moi's study concentrates on the dramatic work of Ibsen locates this trend of anti-uplift literature in a transatlantic context of multiple genres, which allows for a broader understanding of the literary period in general. Using this notion of anti-uplift tropes, I now want to refocus on Piatt's life and poetry within the complex landscape of the American "Realistic" scene.

### **Sarah Piatt's Dead Children**

To date, there has been little scholarship conducted on the biography of Sarah Piatt. By all accounts, she was an enigmatic woman who seems nearly as hard to read as her poetry. However, a quick survey of her experiences demonstrates that her poetry on mourning must have come from deep personal loss. Katherine Tynan's contemporary account of her visits with the Piatt family introduces some key elements of Sarah Piatt's personality. Tynan notes: "Mrs. Piatt's poetry, on the contrary, *palpitated* [emphasis hers]. Her heart had been wrung to make it. It was poetry of dead children and the dead childhood of children. When she kissed her children at night it was with a poignant feeling that the minutes and the hours were taking from her the child she had kissed"

(179).<sup>12</sup> The Piatts lost two adolescent children, both boys, by violent accidental deaths. Louis drowned in a boating accident while the family was in Ireland when he was about eight years old, and Victor, only ten, was killed by a firework explosion on the Fourth of July (Tynan 183-4). In an extremely unfortunate sequence of events, the Piatts also lost an infant son the same year that Victor died in the fireworks accident (1873). Much later in her life, the poet was also to lose her oldest child in an accident as well, though he was an adult.<sup>13</sup> These deaths undoubtedly plagued Piatt for the remainder of her life; indeed, throughout her visits with the Piatts, Tynan often remarks on Mrs. Piatt's lingering grief. She describes Piatt as "always pondering over her dead boys. When she hummed like that one felt that it was in some way an assuagement of pain, a putting-it-asleep" (183). Arguably, Piatt's grief also deeply influenced her poetry. Having experienced the worst kind of personal loss, she must have found little comfort in genteel consolation culture. Her lyrics emphasize the material reality of death and deemphasize the supposed peace found in an afterlife, striving for the agency to openly mourn.

Mary McCartin Wearn addresses Piatt's body of work through the lens of nineteenth-century "maternal poetics," a topic often associated with the Sentimental tradition. Here Wearn argues that Piatt both challenges and redefines the nineteenth-century "maternal" discourse to which the poet is often relegated.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, Piatt's corpus evinces this stance. However, Piatt challenges more than just the "maternal poetics" that Wearn highlights, questioning the very fabric of genteel consolation culture.

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<sup>12</sup> For a charming and more episodic account of Tynan's friendship with the Piatts, see Katherine Tynan (179-192).

<sup>13</sup> See Jessica Forbes Roberts (58).

<sup>14</sup> See Mary McCartin Wearn (163-177).

Here I differ from Jessica Forbes Roberts, who conducts a study on Piatt's consolation literature and infant elegies. Situating Piatt's work within reading practices of the late nineteenth-century anthology culture, Roberts contends that Piatt utilizes conventions of the sentimental consolation genre and, while at times questioning the sentimental tropes, ultimately upholds many of the Sentimental reading practices dominant in the late nineteenth-century. While Roberts examination is compelling with regard to the infant elegy genre and her readings of Piatt's formal innovations with polyvocality, she fails to situate Piatt within a transatlantic context that positions Robert Browning as an influential predecessor, and therefore elides the irony present in Piatt's polyvocal lyrics. Rather than read Piatt in the vacuum of American Sentimentalism, it seems more fruitful to situate her within this more nuanced transatlantic context, particularly given the Piatts' various transatlantic travel, living, and work arrangements. Additionally, I cannot fully endorse Roberts's contention that Piatt's infant elegies ultimately uphold the conventions of Sentimental consolation literature. I will address this issue by examining some of Piatt's poetry that places the poet more at odds with late nineteenth-century consolation tropes rather than in line with them, especially regarding a divided sense of self and the agency to grieve.

### **Piatt's Dismissal of Fairies, Fairyland, and Heaven**

Turning to Piatt's poetry, we find that the symbolic construction of "the fairy" possesses multifaceted functions depending on the particular context. However, taken as a common theme or collective symbol in the poet's oeuvre, the construct of the fairy and

fairy land challenges postbellum consolation tenets. In using the fairy symbol, Piatt utilizes conventional genteel tropes, which emphasize fantasy over material reality. In the realm of fantasy, Piatt's fairies metonymically replace departed loved ones, which ameliorate the grief experienced by the bereaved. After all, if lost children and relatives who have died transform into fantastical creatures that continue to interact with the material world, though from an entirely separate existence, then the idea of death becomes less devastating to those who remain alive. The genteel discourse surrounding death ostensibly lessens the toll that grief takes upon the living by discussing loss through other worldly contexts. The day-to-day struggles resulting from the death of a loved one are lost in this fantasy realm; therefore, any agency to grieve openly for the dead is also absent. One cannot acknowledge the feelings of bitterness, anger, and helplessness that naturally arise when one faces death, because it seems ridiculous feel bitterness towards angels, butterflies, and fairies.

Such consolation tropes inadvertently robbed the living of the ability to grieve the dead. In the postbellum landscape, infant mortality rates were very high. The country had also suffered devastating losses in The Civil War; therefore, this population was well acquainted with the horrors associated with mortality and grief. An inability to acknowledge these deaths with any real depth of feeling would deny those left behind the agency to grieve. Piatt's lyrics call attention to this lack of agency. Utilizing the discourse of genteel literature, Piatt undermines the efficacy of consolation tropes through polyvocal conversations that highlight the cognitive dissonance between the fantasy and material reality of grief.



Beginning with “My Dead Fairies” (1871), we can observe how Piatt’s aesthetic emphasizes the disjuncture between fantasy and actuality.<sup>15</sup> Thematically, this poem hinges upon a multidimensional interpretation of reality that foregrounds both the material and immaterial. Central to this reading on the thematic level is the construct of the fairy, which encompasses an attack on the notion of heaven as a final place of rest for the dearly departed. The content of “My Dead Fairies,” alludes to several levels of death—the corporeal death of individual bodies as well as the metaphorical death of a consolation platitude. The poem’s formal construction reinforces this dualistic component. The five stanzas juxtapose a harsh voice that levels an attack on consolation discourse with a softer, almost childlike, voice that communicates the ideology behind the genteel tropes. We should remember Piatt’s ironic tendencies as we observe this exchange, especially with the intervening genteel persona:

“My Dead Fairies”

‘Do the Fairies ever die?’  
Why, yes, they are always dying.  
There in the freezing dark close by,  
A thousand dead are lying.

Of the time they made so fair  
But the fading shadow lingers;  
Oh, how the light gold of my hair  
Curled on their airy fingers!

I shall not see them again.  
They fell in the Sun’s fierce bright’ning;  
They were drowned in drops of---‘Rain?’  
They were burned to death with lightning.

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<sup>15</sup> See Bennett’s *Palace-Burner* (19).

With bloom, as the bee-songs pass,  
Our sweet-briar keeps its promise;  
The fireflies shine in the grass;  
Winds blow our butterflies from us!

Yet under that thin gray tree,  
With the moonrise in its stillness,  
They keep hidden away from me,  
Forever, in dusty [ch]illness. (lines 1-20)<sup>16</sup>

The childlike persona opens with poem by asking if “the Fairies ever die.” The more experienced persona’s answer provides the key metonymic connection of the poem. The dead “Fairies” represent the “thousand dead” who are lying in the “freezing dark close by.” These figures allude to Civil War casualties, which overwhelmed the entire country during Reconstruction. In this poem, then, the dead fairies metonymically replace the dead bodies lying in their graves. Piatt’s use of the fantastical here aligns with consolation tropes that mitigate the harsher aspects of death. However, the conversation that transpires advocates for a more literal portrayal of the situation, ending with an image of complete separation, with the dead “fairies,” aka “bodies,” hidden away forever in the cold earth.

Though the second stanza nostalgically alludes to “the time they made so fair,” the third stanza marks an abrupt tonal shift. In arguing that the living can never see the departed again, Piatt’s persona starkly undercuts genteel religious ideology, which suggests that Christians will reunite with departed loved ones in heaven. This shift realigns with the presence of an experienced physical speaker, one who feels acutely the embodied despair of perpetual separation from a lost loved one. When the childlike

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<sup>16</sup> All of Piatt’s poems used in this project are taken from Paula Bennett’s *Palace-Burner*.

persona innocently suggests that the fairies drowned in drops of rain, a move marked stylistically with the long dash and the quotation and question marks, the experienced persona harshly admonishes that the fallen had “burned to death with lightning.” The stark tonal contrast between falling by the Sun’s brightness and drowning in raindrops or, alternatively, burning to death by “lightning” highlights this disjuncture. One could easily substitute the interrogative of “rain” with drops of “blood” and gain a more apt sense of the material death. Piatt’s choice to abstain from this harsher treatment aligns with the genteel conventions that she often observes. However, burning to death by any means involves a more stark—Realist—representation of death than the fourth stanza’s “Winds blow our butterflies from us,” though that sentiment still communicates loss. If we align the construct of the fairy with the genteel trope of a soft and gentle death, then we can position both Piatt and this poem as an agent for that ideology’s destruction. Implicit in that ideological destruction is the need for the agency to grieve.

Beginning with a question, this work dismantles the utopian construct of “heaven” within the genteel topos. In the first stanza, Piatt challenges the idyllic notion that the dearly departed morph into angels, cherubs, and fairies upon death by placing them instead in the “freezing dark close by,” a spatially defined area that certainly disrupts the iconic images of the eternal light of “heaven.” Responding to the framing question of the work—“Do the Fairies ever die?”—the experienced persona answers “why yes, they are always dying.” This move reinforces the material loss of the “thousand dead,” and the reality of grief for the bereft, while deemphasizing the transcendent glory usually associated with those who die—especially if those deaths resulted from war. By stating

that the fairies are “always dying,” the experienced persona temporally locates the problematic in an eternal present, suggesting that this substantial grief perpetually consumes the living person.

The poem’s final stanza only further enhances this reading. Rather than rejoicing in heaven, the dead lie in the material earth, “under that thin gray tree.” Access to them remains forever blocked, presumably even after the speaker’s death. The final word of the poem, “chillness,” reinforces the despair that the work as a whole embodies. None of Perkins’s genteel religious refuge resides here. Rather, a biting portrait of the experience of human loss challenges that cultural construct. Additionally, Piatt’s persona suggests that this cultural trope serves only to delude its citizens. The pun in the first stanza highlights this last point most succinctly, with “lying” encompassing both a physical state and a verbal act. On one level the dead fairies lay in the material earth, but on another they “lie” to society at large, stripping them of the agency to grieve. The seemingly softer tone of stanzas two and four openly mock this pervasive and deceptive ideology.

Elsewhere Piatt refers to the fairy construct to contest the religious platitudes of consolation literature. Though with less emphasis on the immediate grief in “My Dead Fairies,” “Love-Stories” also encompasses a similar theological questioning. However, “Love-Stories,”<sup>17</sup> first appearing in 1872, confronts a broader variety of consolation tropes than just the religious. Much like the previous poem, Piatt structures “Love-Stories” around a polyvocal persona that enacts a conversation between a naïve childlike voice and an experienced adult voice. This poem focuses broadly on the idyllic fantasies

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<sup>17</sup> See Bennett’s *Palace-Burner* (35).

of youth, and with the fourth stanza specifically mentioning the Bible and praying, religion, consequently, falls into that fantasy. Formally, this poem comprises five line stanzas that open and end with short trimeter lines, juxtaposed with longer irregular pentameter lines. The child's lines are marked with quotation marks while the adult persona speaks without typographical notations. The stylistic tension between the voices of the young and the old operates thematically as well. This work hinges upon the contrasting perceptions of the "old" and that of the "young," with the first, fourth, and last stanzas of this poem highlighting this thematic thread.

#### "Love-Stories"

Can I tell any? No:

I have forgotten all I ever knew.

I am too old. I saw the fairies go

Forever from the moonshine and the dew

Before I met with you.

'Rose's grandmother knows

Love stories?' *She* could tell you one or two?

'*She* is not young?' You wish that you were Rose?

'*She* hears love-stories? Are they ever true?'

Some time I may ask you.

I was not living when

Columbus came here, nor before that? So,

You wonder when I saw fairies, then?

The Indians would have killed them all, you know?

'How *long* is long ago?'

And if I am too old

To know love-stories, why am I not good?

Why don't I read the Bible, and not scold?

Why don't I pray, as all old ladies should?

(I only wish I could.)

Why don't I buy gray hair?  
And why----  
Oh! child, the Sphinx herself might spring  
Out of her sands to answer, should you dare  
Her patience with your endless questioning.  
'Does *she* know anything?'

Perhaps. 'then, could she tell  
Love-stories?' If her lips were not all stone;  
For there is one she must remember well—  
One whose great glitter showed a fiery zone  
Brightness beyond its own.

One whose long music aches—  
How sharp the sword, how sweet the snake, O Queen!—  
Into the last unquiet heart that breaks.  
But the Nile-lily rises faint betwe[e]n—  
You wonder what I mean?

I mean there is but one  
Love-story in this withered world, forsooth;  
And it is brief, and ends, where it begun,  
(What if I tell, in play, the dreary truth?)  
With something we call Youth. (lines 1-40)

In the first, fourth, and last stanzas, one can internalize the rhythmic call and response that moves this poem forward with the “old lady” either repeating or anticipating the child’s questions. The important parenthetical lines represent a third element of the multivocal persona—the internal dialogue of the experienced persona. Structurally, the three elements interweave to create a superficially humorous tone. However, once the poem is placed in conversation with other “fairy” poems, we can read it more seriously.

The three stanzas devoted to the “old lady” persona highlight the connection between the fairies, religion, and the “love-stories” of youth. Indeed, in this work, the three separate ideological constructs operate interchangeably. The fairies, gone with the

moonshine and dew, mutate into the contents of the Bible and prayer, and, eventually, coalesce into the love story of the final stanza. However comic this progression may seem, the religious connotations of the work paired with the ironic playfulness of the last two lines suggest a more transgressive reading. Though the experienced persona longs to pray and read the Bible, presumably to find the comfort that she has lost, she cannot act “as all old ladies should.” Because the “final” love-story of the last stanza begins and ends with youth, this experienced persona is disillusioned by such fancy—not necessarily by choice, but by virtue of her life’s struggles. As with many of Piatt’s polyvocal constructions, the disjunction between childlike innocence and aged wisdom underscores the inefficacy of the consolation topos. Piatt crosses no boundaries in dismissing such concepts as “Fairyland,” but by equating the Bible and the act of prayer with the fantastic, she undercuts the value, if not the existence, of religion itself. This bold gesture aligns more with American Realist tropes, which emphasize a material existence over a spiritual one. Realism instructs us to focus on the tangible and the known, and Piatt’s lyrics repeatedly point us towards an embodied experience of grief.

A very similar strain of this deceptive ideology and Piatt’s exposure of its inadequacy appears in her 1876 “Comfort—By a Coffin.”<sup>18</sup> The polyvocality Piatt employs here differs from that of “My Dead Fairies” and “Love Stories” in that the split in those poems is more decisive, with at least two distinct voices interwoven through dialogue. In “Comfort—By a Coffin,” the split persona anticipates the dialogue of a “friend,” but filters those anticipated answers through an ironic self-referential

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<sup>18</sup> See Bennett’s *Palace-Burner* (64-66).

perspective. This model provides an interesting evolution in the dramatic monologue genre. On the one hand, the call and response pattern could reflect an internal conflict for the grieving persona, with all the dialogue taking place within her mind, like Browning's dramatic monologues. Alternatively, a "real" conversation could be taking place by the coffin, with the exchange disproportionately eliding some of the well-known "comforting" adages because such adages are so provincial. Regardless of whether the conversation takes place within one persona's mind or externally between two people, the tone is combative. The title aptly signals this tone, with "Comfort" standing in opposition to "By a Coffin" on the other side of the dash. These two notions seem incompatible, and "by a coffin" communicates an intentionally bitter image. Piatt could have softened the title by choosing a gentler phrase such as grave side, church yard, or even funeral. Rather, she chooses the alliteration of the successive hard "c's," further emphasizing the irreconcilable tension between "comfort" and "coffin." Indeed, the poem offers no solace, which suggests that no comfort can be found in the face of such grief.

The split persona anticipates the dialogue of a "friend," but it filters those anticipated lines through an ironic self-referential lens. Appropriately, the construct of "Fairyland" appears in the first stanza, and displays the persona's anticipated response of his or her "friend." The opening frame of "Ah, friend of mine" acts as a refrain at the beginning of each stanza, grounding the poem and emphasizing the poem's recursiveness:



“Comfort—By a Coffin”

Ah, friend of mine,  
The old enchanted story!—Oh,  
I cannot hear a word!  
Tell some poor child who loved a bird,  
And knows he holds it stained and still:  
‘It flies—in Fairyland!  
Its nest is in a palm-tree, on a hill;  
Go, catch it—if you will.’

Ah, friend of mine,  
The music (which ear hath not heard?)  
At best wails from the skies,  
Somehow, into our funeral cries!  
The flowers (eye hath not seen?) still fail  
To hide the coffin-lid.  
Against this face so pitiless now and pale  
Can the high Heavens avail?

Ah, friend of mine,  
I think you mean—to mean it all!  
But then an angel’s wing  
Is a remote and subtle thing,  
(If you could show me any such  
In air that I can breathe!)  
And surely Death’s cold hand has much, so much,  
About it we can touch! (lines -24)

Here, the “friend” that each stanza addresses represents the voice of consolation tropes, which seeks to comfort those in need. Because the persona refuses to “hear a word” of the “old enchanted story,” the tone of the last three lines of the stanza are mocking. This grieving voice dismisses the genteel refuge of “Fairyland,” suggesting that “the friend” go tell such fanciful stories to a child. Even in that context, this “comforting” trope falls flat, as the child holds the bird “stained” and “still,” knowing full well that the bird cannot fly to fairyland and nest in a palm tree. Here again, Piatt emphasizes the material

reality of the dead bird and dismisses the genteel consolation topos, which disallows people the agency to grieve. How can the child, holding its dead and bloody bird, reconcile the material loss with the “comforting” scenario of a fairyland and palm trees? The implicit answer is: the child cannot. And if children cannot find solace in that notion, then mature adults are even more inhibited. In suggesting that the “enchanted story” is unsuitable even for a child’s grief, Piatt’s grieving persona shatters that ideological refuge and insists on a Realist perspective.<sup>19</sup>

The second and third stanzas consistently stress embodied sensory experiences that undermine the ethereal support offered by the consoling “friend.” Instead of a host of angels singing, we find music that “wails from the skies” into the “funeral cries.” No flowers can fully shield the bereft from the coffin-lid, metonymically implying that no “pretty” distraction can supplant the pain of death. The parentheticals emphasize the embodied sensory experiences felt by the recently dispossessed, with “what ear hath not heard” and “eye hath not seen.” The grieving persona asks, how can heaven “avail” such a tragedy as a corpse’s face, now “pitiess” and “pale?” In the third stanza, Piatt focuses

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<sup>19</sup> Jessica Forbes Roberts deals at length with Piatt’s infant elegies within the culture of anthologies and the genre of consolation literature in the late nineteenth-century. Her study highlights some biographical elements of Piatt’s life that undoubtedly influenced her poetry regarding death—namely that Piatt lost four children before she herself passed away. Roberts study aligns Piatt’s work with the genteel in both style and content, however, while acknowledging the ambivalence Piatt expresses toward death. Through that lens, Roberts claims that Piatt’s tone is more questioning than ironic, representing a genuine struggle to find comfort in religious faith.

on tactile sensations, stating that an “angel’s wing” is so “remote” and “subtle” as to be rendered non-existent. She challenges: “show me any such in air that I can breathe!” Stressing even the physical side of the personified Death, with his “cold” hand, Piatt avows that death involves much that can be touched. How, she asks implicitly, should we seek comfort in these fanciful stories, when the “cold” harsh material reality of death, a death that we can see, hear, and touch, stands inescapably before us? The embodied grief of material reality shatters all attempts of comfort. There is no agency to accurately acknowledge the pain of death in those “enchanted stories.”

The final two stanzas overtly challenge the religion behind the consolation ideology. Here, Piatt’s persona rails against genteel religious platitudes in the face of real loss:

Ah, friend of mine,  
Say nothing of the thorns—and then  
Say nothing of the snow.  
God’s will? It is—that thorns must grow,  
Despite our bare and troubled feet,  
To crown Christ on the cross;  
The snow keeps white watch on the unrisen wheat,  
And yet—the world is sweet.

Ah, friend of mine,  
I know, I know—all you can know!  
All you can say is—this:  
“It is the last time you can kiss  
This only one of all the dead,  
Knowing it is the last;  
These are the last tears you can ever shed  
On this fair fallen head.” (lines 25-40)

In the penultimate stanza, the persona shifts from the gentler diction of the first stanzas to a frank discussion that undermines free will in Christian theology. By comparing god's will to the thorns that crown Christ's head on the cross, Piatt suggests a powerful revision to that iconic religious story. The persona states that god's will is "that thorns must grow" *in order to* "crown Christ on the cross." In this configuration, the thorns, traditional Christian symbols of human sin and Christ's sacrificial atonement thereof, grow so that Christ can be "crowned" with them. Here, Piatt's persona undermines the notion that humans, born into original sin, require the sacrifice that the crucifixion mythically assumes. These lines subtly imply that it is God's will—and not human transgression—that ultimately requires the salvation provided by the Christ figure. In this formulation, humans have very little agency to intervene. The snow's "white watch" on the "unrisen wheat" reinforces the futility in fighting against fate. According to this stanza, god has ordained that humans will suffer regardless of their actions or their salvation. The genteel refuge that Perkins describes offers no solace because in Piatt's estimation, the thorns are pre-ordained. Read through that lens, then, the last line of the stanza communicates a bitter irony—the world represents the exact opposite of "sweet."

The last stanza reinforces the material finality resulting from human passing. Emphasizing such a finite end circumvents contemporary consolation tropes, which would focus on a celestial transcendence and hint at future spiritual reunions in heaven. Addressing the "friend" one final time, the persona definitively quells all attempts to position grief as anything but a tragic final parting. With no assurances for a potential reunion, the bereft figure can view this parting as nothing other than the "last" time that

he or she will view the “fair fallen head.” Using a dark pun with “fallen,” Piatt suggests that it is futile to hope for anything beyond that final tangible moment. The last two lines leave us with a stark Realistic image rooted in material reality—tears falling on a corpse. Going back to the title, this image offers no comfort by the coffin, only a sustained portrait of grief, which seems to be the only agency that Piatt will allow.

Piatt’s “Keeping the Faith” (1877) contains religious critiques to “Comfort—By a Coffin,” but extends the metonymic connections to include cultural myths. Here, the polyvocal persona again enacts the conversation between an experienced and inexperienced voice. Opening with a framing question put forth by the “child”—“How long must you believe in Fairy-land,”—the “adult” persona solidly responds with “Forever, child,” which defines the temporal boundaries paradoxically, by liberating it into “forever.” The paradox fails to impart any substantial meaning until the powerful concluding lines, however. The irony in the final stanza changes the tone so dramatically that one should return to the beginning in order to read through that lens. For that reason, I will discuss this poem slightly out of order, by initially looking at the first and last stanzas, rather than following the poem’s progression. The first stanza reads as follows:

“Keeping the Faith”

How long must you believe in Fairy-land?  
Forever, child. You must not bear to doubt  
That one true country sweeter than this honey,  
Where little people surely go about  
And buy and sell with grains of golden sand,  
Which they, indeed, the foolish things, call money! (lines 1-6)

Here, the reader can observe the call and response pattern between the young and old, which frames the conversation for the remainder of the poem. Here, though, the child seems more precocious than those we have encountered elsewhere, as the opening question conveys a shadow of doubt. In asking “how long *must* you believe,” the child implies that he or she might prefer not to believe in fairy-land, as if sustaining the belief is somehow taxing. Though there is no direct mention of death or grief here, the fantastic system of “faith,” as relayed in the title, requires mental energy to maintain, which undermines any sanctuary that the ideology might offer. The last stanza reinforces this idea:

Did I believe in Fairy-land? I do.  
The young believe in it less than the old.  
As eyes grow blind and heads grow white and whiter  
(The heads that dreamed about it in their gold)  
We change its name to Heaven. That makes it true,  
And all the light of all the stars grows lighter. (lines 31-36)

Here, Piatt highlights a metonymic connection between “fairy-land” and heaven, suggesting that the transformation occurs as a person ages. The assertion here is biting—heaven, the anticipated Christian telos, only exists in the same realm as childhood beliefs in fairy-land, something that abiding adult Christians should brush aside as juvenile fancy. In hinting that “heaven” bears no more relevance on the world than as a similarly constructed adult fancy, Piatt seriously undermines the entire Christian ideological framework. Additionally, though this poem is not an infant elegy like those that Roberts highlights, when reading those infant elegies against this poem, we gain a better understanding of the religious challenges that those poems offer. Once we assess Piatt’s

irony, we can better judge the tone in the infant elegies. Her repeated dismissal of religion as a source of consolation requires that we question Piatt's alignment with those genteel consolation tropes. Piatt finds no agency to grieve within that ideology; rather, she advocates approaching death, realistically, on the material level, where people are allowed to embody palpable loss with real tears.

The ironic turn of the poem's last two lines also calls for a reassessment of the tonal qualities of the entire work. As Paula Bennett contends, a misreading of Piatt's irony often aligns her with her more genteel readers. Given that throughout the poem Piatt has equated "fairy-land" with increasingly unreal or mythic circumstances, there can be little doubt as to the concluding irony. The most palpable example manifests in the penultimate stanza, with the "it" referring to "fairy-land," or, heaven:

The captains have believed in it and gone  
With swords and soldiers there to fight for it,  
And torn their plumes and spoiled their scarlet sashes,  
But mended matters for us scarce a whit.  
Why, Cinderella, her glass slippers on,  
Goes there—yes, now—from kitchen-smoke and ashes! (lines 25-30)

For Piatt, then, fairy-land, heaven, and Cinderella all reside in a place bound up in genteel consolation ideology, a place that starkly contrasts with the realities of the material earth that she and her readers so aptly experience. In light of Perkins's argument that postbellum genteel religious verse offered a spiritual refuge from a harsh reality, one can begin to comprehend the magnitude of Piatt's critique. Her polyvocal lyrics utilize genteel rhythms and diction, but the dialogue between the wise personas and the naïve

ones allow her to openly mock consolation tropes. Her focus on the immediate and tangible aspects of life espouses a deterministic existence centered on the material earth.

Working backwards from the charged conclusion, the adult persona in the third stanza ridicules the genteel ideology bound up in that “faith”:

*Who* have believed in it [fairy-land]? Why, all the men  
In all the world—and all the women, too.  
Because it is so pleasant to believe in:  
There are so many pretty things to do,  
Such light to laugh and dance in; yes, and then  
Such lonesome, rainy woods for one to grieve in. (lines 13-18)

Here, Piatt mockingly suggests that the consolation ideology is universal, with “all the men in all the world” believing in “it.” The “it” here represents both fairy-land and heaven, and, read through the ironic lens provided by the final stanza, Piatt’s sarcasm stings through such “pretty things” and “light to laugh and dance in.” This last line provides the only reference to grief in this poem. Playing on parochial consolation tropes, Piatt juxtaposes the “light to laugh and dance in” with “lonesome rainy woods for one to grieve in.” The contrast is stark, and Piatt’s irony dismantles those two stock examples. As she suggests elsewhere in her corpus, grief cannot be confined to the “lonesome rainy woods.” Rather, it is consuming, present during the day and night, sunshine and rain. As the last line of the poem implies, the tendency to make “light” of the harsh realities of death diminishes the toll that grief takes upon the living, as Piatt undercuts any desire to keep the faith.



## Piatt's Dead Children Are Not Dolls or Saints

In the concluding section of this chapter, I would like to shift the focus to another version of Piatt's polyvocal lyrics. This poem's passive figures provide a transition to my discussion of Eliot's passive figures in the next chapter. Though "Funeral of a Doll" utilizes the call and response pattern between an adult and child persona towards the end, the bulk of the poem narrates the occasion of a funeral. In "Funeral of a Doll," (1872) it is unclear whether the poem dramatizes the funeral of an actual child or, rather, the make-believe funeral of a child's doll.<sup>20</sup> The emphasis on performance in this poem is twofold. On the one hand, it invokes the harsher elements of "real life" in order to mock consolation tropes in the guise of a "play." The staging of the child's/doll's funeral reinforces the hollowness of "the performance" required when "speaking" in the context of consolation tropes. On the other hand, with the introduction of the doll figure, Piatt suggests that consolation ideology objectifies both children and adults, stripping them of any agency to live, die, or grieve. The dramatization of this poetic funeral parallels the disingenuous staging of death rituals in material reality, equating people with characters in a pre-determined play. These characters cannot think or act outside of the script, leaving them virtually powerless in the face of actual loss.

The first stanza introduces us to "Little Nell":

"The Funeral of a Doll"

They used to call her Little Nell,  
In memory of that lovely child

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<sup>20</sup> See Bennett *Palace-Burner* (32-33).

Whose story each had learned to tell.  
She, too, was slight and still and mild,  
Blue-eyed and sweet; she always smiled,  
And never troubled any one  
Until her pretty life was done.  
And so they tolled a tiny bell,  
That made a wailing fine and faint,  
As fairies ring, and all was well,  
Then she became a waxen saint. (lines 1-11)

The poem opens with a reference to “Little Nell,” the character who could either be a doll or a little girl, depending on how one reads the ambiguous pronoun references.<sup>21</sup> Piatt directs her third person persona (arguably the mother who uses “I” in the third stanza) to narrate the story of a “lovely child” whose “pretty little life was done.” As readers, we cannot tell if the child in question died a long time ago or if she was recently deceased. Here, the child and doll are conflated and the tolling of the “tiny bell” could signal either a real funeral for the deceased child or a make-believe funeral for a living child’s doll, perhaps named in honor of the deceased Little Nell. The choice to use “tiny” to describe the death toll comically implies a triviality about the situation. However, reading this section through Piatt’s irony suggests a more sarcastic portrayal, with the “tiny bell” “wailing fine and faint,” like the fairies. Diction such as “wailing” does not align with “fine and faint,” which supports a reading with Piatt’s irony. The consistently short iambic tetrameter lines give the stanza a sing-song quality that seems fitting for a pretend funeral, and yet also follows genteel conventions of “pretty” poetry. This persona does

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<sup>21</sup> Here, Piatt also likely alludes to Charles Dickens’s Little Nell from *The Old Curiosity Shop*. This tragic character, small, frail, and unwaveringly good, eventually dies tragically while trying to care for her grandfather. By invoking her name, Piatt capitalizes on the character’s popularity and also, perhaps, critiques the sentimental discourse surrounding Little Nell’s death.

not evoke the bitterness of a bereaved parent or adult, but, rather, employs the more innocent tone of someone who does not fully grasp the concept of mortality—until the stanza’s last line.

With Piatt’s characteristic irony, the final line delivers a blow. The fairy reference in the penultimate line aligns with the idyllic fantasies presented in the other fairy poems and dismissively explains “and all was well.” However, the last line, “Then she became a waxen saint,” conveys a much darker concept. Little Nell, the dead child, has morphed into something unnaturally constructed, something to be idolized and worshipped. Through this transformation, the child’s (or doll’s) death becomes not a bitter tragedy in material reality, but a symbolic ritual to observe culturally. For the deceased child to become a waxen saint, the child must be stripped of all human qualities, either living or dead. To be waxen is to be pliable and, yet, unchanging. Metonymically, the dead child becomes a revered ideological symbol, which deemphasizes the physical loss. The fact that Little Nell, the once living child, has become both a doll and a waxen saint now reinforces the performative elements involved in death rituals. Here, Piatt’s challenge to genteel consolation culture manifests: we dehumanize these children to become dolls and saints, unnatural objects for which we wail “fine and faint,” but do not acknowledge the bitter reality of their deaths. The performance and spectacle of the grief then overshadows the material reality of the child’s death, for how can anyone grieve the loss of something that was never actually “alive.”

In a pattern that remains consistent throughout the poem, the first ten lines of the next stanza returns to the earlier light-hearted, though ambiguous, tone:

Her funeral it was small and sad.  
Some birds sang bird-hymns in the air.  
The humming-bee seemed hardly glad,  
Spite of the honey everywhere.  
The very sunshine seemed to wear  
Some thought of death, caught in its gold,  
That made it waver wan and cold.  
Then, with what broken voice he had,  
The Preacher slowly murmured on  
(With many warnings to the bad)  
The virtues of the Doll now gone. (lines 12-22)

In the initial eleven line stanzas, the first ten sing-song iambic-tetrameter lines invoke a childlike innocence, but the last line delivers a much darker assertion that undercuts the whimsical qualities of the previous lines. For instance, in the second stanza, the funeral of Little Nell is conveyed as if it were orchestrated and aided by the natural world. The ceremony was “small and sad,” and the birds and bees were “hardly glad.” The sun itself appears “wan and cold,” and the natural elements reinforce stock genteel poetic tropes while simultaneously maintaining an emotional distance. We do not encounter grieving mourners in this stanza; the only person mentioned is the preacher, who, with a broken voice, “murmured on / (With many warnings to the bad).” Here Piatt again uses a comic situation to comment on the absurdity of death rituals, emphasizing the “performance” elements of the spectacle. As in the first stanza, the last line emphasizes a darker aspect of mortality. Paired together, we read “Then she became a waxen saint” and “The virtues of the Doll now gone.” The once living Little Nell has become something unnatural and inorganic—something to be recognized culturally as either an idol or a plaything. These comparisons brutally undermine the reality of a grieving family faced with the untimely

loss of a child. Piatt takes aim at the consolation culture at large here, and the last two stanzas of the poem bolster this claim.

In the third stanza we find the only speaking “I” that appears:

A paper coffin rosily-lined  
Had little Nell. There drest in white,  
With buds about her, she reclined,  
A very fair and piteous site—  
Enough to make one sorry, quite.  
And, when at last the lid was shut  
Under white flowers, I fancied—but  
No matter. When I heard the wind  
Scatter Spring-rain that night across  
The Doll’s wee grave, with tears half-blind  
One child’s heart felt a grievous loss. (lines 23-33)

Though the first six lines invoke a similar tonal quality utilized in the first several stanzas, the last five lines depart from that model. The appearance of the personal pronoun brings closer emotional proximity to the persona. Presumably, this adult persona is the mother of the grieving child who speaks in the last stanza. Given the lines “And, when at last the lid was shut / Under white flowers, I fancied—but / No matter,” we wonder if Little Nell’s funeral has in fact been a staged event for a child’s doll, or, perhaps, the rehearsed explanation of a death ritual to a living child who does not fully comprehend death. The lines “I fancied—but, No Matter” gesture towards a realization, but then revert back to the stock ideology. Here Piatt seems to be playing on the word “fancy” by inverting the meaning. The persona “fancies,” or entertains, the stark reality of the situation, but then dismisses the notion. The last lines reinforce this idea by taking a dark turn, ending with a stark picture of the living child who, upon recognizing the

magnitude of the day's events, begins to cry in earnest. It is at this point that the reader and persona close the gap and begin to observe the bitterness of death through an emotional lens that strikes grief in the heart of a child, mother, and reader.

The opening of the final stanza showcases a realization, conveyed through the dialogue of the grieving child:

'It was a funeral, mamma. Oh,  
Poor Little Nell is dead, is dead.  
How dark—and do you hear it blow?  
She is afraid.' And, as she said  
These sobbing words, she laid her head  
Between her hands and whispered: "Here  
Her bed is made, the precious dear—  
She cannot sleep in it, I know.  
And there is no one left to wear  
Her pretty clothes. *Where did she go?*  
--See, this poor ribbon tied her hair!" (lines 34-44)

These initial lines are relayed as if the child finally realizes that the events of the day were not, indeed, a spectacle, but rather a substantial and tangible loss. To say, "It was a funeral, mamma" suggests that the child perhaps participated in the day's events without fully understanding or acknowledging the circumstances. With this dawning of perception, the child suddenly concludes that the day's events were in fact real, and that Little Nell is dead, something that has not been overtly stated until this point. The change from a sunny day to a rainy and windy night seems to have prompted this realization. The child exclaims, "How dark—do you hear it blow? / She is afraid." This newfound knowledge marks a decided move into the material scene, and the diction signals a realistic scenario with realistic language. Words like "dark," "afraid," and "sobbing"

mark this shift. In her now embodied grief, the child makes the connection that the deceased Little Nell is outside in the cold ground, away from her bed, which is inviting and safe. The child now acknowledges “She cannot sleep in it, I know,” and also realizes that Little Nell is no longer present to wear “her pretty clothes.” All of these acknowledgments reinforce the reality of the loss of a material body, but the next question, emphasized by italics, questions loss more esoterically. In asking, “*Where did she go,*” the child ponders the spiritual aspects of loss. Knowing that Little Nell’s body is in the ground, outside in the wind and rain, the child ponders where the deceased’s spirit or essence has gone. The spiritual implications and potential answers to this question are many, but Piatt chooses not to explore those avenues. Rather, she leaves the italicized question hanging in the penultimate line, and then promptly returns to the material with “See, this poor ribbon tied her hair.”

Here, Piatt addresses this important question about a religious telos by way of avoidance. The last line of the poem emphasizes the material loss that the living child feels when holding Little Nell’s ribbon. This shift in focus from questions of the afterlife to the grief experienced by the bereaved stresses the embodied grief of the living, not the potential spiritual ramifications for the dead. Piatt does not offer any genteel platitudes or religious consolation for the personas’ grief. Rather, she leaves Little Nell in her “wee grave” in the dark and cold rain. This move of avoiding an answer to the italicized question in the penultimate line paradoxically offers an answer. In response to “*Where did she go,*” Piatt implies: “We do not know. All we know is that her body is in the ground and her material possessions are with the living. And the deceased child’s

absence is felt palpably by those she left behind.” These sentiments do not offer a shelter from the harsh realities of life, but, rather, reinforce those bitter realities. The overwhelming question that plagues every person who experiences the death of a loved one is circumvented. It is left hanging in italics, entirely disregarded. In this manner, Piatt’s thoughts on mortality firmly align with Realist tropes, focusing on the material present. Piatt finds no solace in dolls and waxen saints; rather, she longs for the agency to grieve openly and shrug off the burden of a constricted consolation ideology.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that Piatt’s poetry challenges the genteel consolation tropes that characterized postbellum poetry. Her call and response poetry open the channels for this type of questioning, as they allow for a divided sense of self. Though she often positions this division between two personas—one skeptical and the other innocent—the conversations that take place signal an internal struggle to comprehend the material reality of grief. Piatt rejects consolation ideology in an effort to gain the agency to grieve openly for the deceased. She emphasizes the effects of an embodied despair that cannot abide the religious platitudes offered in consolation tropes. Though she uses genteel aesthetic forms, her polyvocal lyrics undercut the ideology that genteel consolation literature offers. In this manner, her corpus thematically aligns with postbellum Realism, and her poetry offers a bridge to the isolation so characteristic of Modernism. The next chapter on T. S. Eliot illuminates Eliot’s expansion of the polyvocal methods and his further questioning of the notion of an essential self.



## CHAPTER IV

### “NEITHER LIVING NOR DEAD”: POLYVOCALITY, AGENCY, AND IMPOTENCE IN T. S. ELIOT’S EARLY POETRY

Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.  
T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (lines 37-41)

This chapter focuses on the work of T. S. Eliot, a poet who in many ways synthesizes the stylistic approaches of Robert Browning and Sarah Piatt. Eliot composes both proper dramatic monologues in manners similar to Browning and also incorporates polyvocal conversations into his lyrics in manners similar to Piatt. His experiments with a unified persona and polyvocality often coalesce within the same poem, producing a more fragmented effect than either Browning or Piatt. With this fragmented effect, Eliot also questions the notion of the essential speaking self. Eliot’s stylistic approach implicitly asks: with so many voices from the past, present, and future comprising one “single” perspective, how can we limit the human condition to a single essential self? And, if we cannot limit the human condition to an essential self, then what ramifications come to the human “soul.” Like Browning and Piatt, Eliot addresses questions of agency, divine will, and fate; however, while Browning and Piatt are more concerned with the limits of agency on the material earth, Eliot’s concerns focus more on the

spiritual effects of this fragmented self. If there is no essential speaking self, then who is in control, and what, exactly, are we doing here on earth?

Eliot's ideas about the alignment of culture, history, art, and literature do not succinctly appear until his 1919 "Tradition and the Individual Talent" essay, within which he posits his now well-known views on threads of literary influence. However, in reading his earlier poems, it is clear these patterns emerge in the years before 1919. From a contemporary standpoint, it might be more appropriate to approach Eliot's poetry through Heaney's metaphor of digging posited some sixty years later. But, rather than "digging" in the earth to find some generative spark, as Heaney alludes, in Eliot's poetry readers "dig" through history, culture, and literature to understand the polyvocal aesthetic that Eliot presents to us, as if he creates a continuing conversation between various artists and writers, unbounded by time. In this way, Eliot disrupts the temporal boundaries that surround a unified persona. His personas, whether wholly unified or not, do not operate in a specific spatial and temporal context, but, rather, extend into shifting spatial and temporal contexts through these polyvocal influences.

Eliot addresses his aesthetic and its implicit connection to "problems with the soul" in this essay as well. In speaking about "personality" and "impersonality," Eliot makes this distinction:

The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take not place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality. (42)

Though much of this passage relates Eliot's well-known theories on the impersonality of the poet, the first sentence speaks directly to a distinction between the body and the soul. The metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul deals with the unification of the body and the soul. Dating at least as far back as Aristotle, this theory espouses that the body and the soul are one and the same in a living being, as opposed to alternate theories that separate the body and the soul. In this passage, Eliot advocates for a separation between the body and the soul, and then compares this divide to the separation of the poet, as a person, and the poetry, as a medium. Though Eliot frames this conversation through aesthetic terms, the passage also challenges the theories of a soul/body convergence. Implicit to this convergence are these questions: if the soul and body are one and the same, then what happens to the soul once the body dies? What drives the soul/body while it lives on the earth? To what extent can this soul/body intervene in material reality and, then, in a spiritual afterlife? For Eliot, these questions were of paramount importance. This chapter examines some of Eliot's earliest poetry with these questions in mind, looking to both style and content for possible answers.

In *Victorian and Modern Poetics*, Carol Christ argues that the relationship between the Victorian dramatic monologue and the Modernist approaches of masks and personas engenders similar aesthetic programs. She draws parallels between the dramatic monologue's desire to be at once a personal utterance and an objective event independent of the life experiences of the poet. Turning to Oscar Wilde, Christ marks his concept of the mask as the bridge between Victorian and Modernist poetic modes (32). According to Christ, Wilde "did not emphasize the separation between the man and his work that for

Tennyson and Browning constituted the chief advantage of the dramatic monologue. Rather, he insists on the connection between the man and his masks” (32). For Christ, Modernist poetics realize the most radical implications of Victorian poetry by treating the “concept of voice not merely [as] a poetic strategy but an idea of personality that motivates poetic expression” (32). Christ places Eliot’s use of voice, especially his proper dramatic monologues like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Gerontion,” in line with Tennyson more than Browning because Eliot does not use masks and personas to create historical characters as much as he uses masks and personas to create characters that “delimit a zone of consciousness” (47). James T. Mayer argues for a similar notion when he discusses Eliot’s “psychic monologues.” In this configuration, Mayer distinguishes between “psychic” and “psychological” by aligning psychological with the mind’s “behavior” and psychic with “awareness.”<sup>1</sup> Though I think a consideration of Swinburne’s influence might aid in filling in the gaps between Tennyson, Browning, and Eliot, the important distinction here is that Eliot’s polyvocality evokes a mood more than the representation of a historically viable subjective speaker. This is the idea to keep in mind with nearly all of Eliot’s early poetry to *The Waste Land* in 1922. Glennis Byron builds upon Christ’s argument by adding:

In a similar fashion, the numerous literary echoes combine with the heterogeneity of differing voices in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* to erase the sense of any specific speaker. Rather than playing with the tension between the voice of poet and

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<sup>1</sup> Mayer further defines the phrase “psychic monologue” as follows: “In view of the popular connotations of the words ‘psychological’ and ‘psychic,’ ‘psychic’ seems preferable as a term: its associations with special powers of insight and sensitivity are closer to the content and method of Eliot’s monologues than the popular association of ‘psychological’ with the weird or demented (‘psychological thriller’)” (293).

speaker, both Eliot and Pound can be said to create multiple fragmented voices which become a composite voice, a voice which is, ultimately, the voice of the poet. (116)

I propose to extend this reasoning a few steps and argue that for Eliot, polyvocality *becomes* the mask that Wilde advocates. However, rather than viewing Eliot's "composite voice," or his polyvocality, as the ultimate voice of the poet, I approach the lyrics as conversations that complicate the notion of an essential speaking self.

In this chapter, I examine Eliot's early career with several purposes in mind. In part, I have chosen to focus on Eliot's earliest poetry because it chronologically overlaps with Piatt's later poetry. In effect, then, this project will explore successive aesthetic approaches between Browning, Piatt, and Eliot. Additionally, Eliot's early poetry exemplifies his formative experiments with polyvocal approaches; these experiments eventually coalesce into the characteristic style of *The Waste Land*. Therefore, this project helps to establish the evolution of Eliot's poetic voice from its beginning incarnations. Keeping this trajectory in mind, I will examine some of Eliot's poetry in *The March Hare* and demonstrate how his aesthetic enacts conversations on several different levels. To grasp more fully how Eliot builds polyvocal conversations into his poetry, I propose to distinguish two levels: the horizontal and the vertical. Horizontal polyvocality refers to the poem's speakers, which often change and shift abruptly. Generally, the speaking "I" that opens the poem becomes fragmented, resulting in a multiplication of voices. Additionally, Eliot often disrupts the temporal elements of the poem, so the speaking "I" might shift from the present to the past or future, which opens conversations between different incarnations of even the same speaking persona.

However, another important aspect of Eliot's polyvocality is his use of allusion and quotation to invoke other "voices" from texts in literary, religious, and philosophical traditions. I will refer to these voices as "vertical" to distinguish them from those that actually narrate or dramatize the poem. While the horizontal sketches remain within the temporal and spatial circumference of the poem, the vertical interrupts the poem and intervenes, often at multiple points and with multiple effects, introducing additional "voices" or levels of polyvocality.

In the context of the poetic approaches, Eliot reacts against the intensely personal Romantic lyric "I" and the next iteration in the Victorians. Ron Schuchard argues that Eliot returns to literary classicism via Hulme to articulate his "impersonal" aesthetic, and Lyndall Gordon argues that Eliot finds his personal religious convictions among an older set of doctrines harkening back to more austere strictures embodied in the Doctrine of Original Sin. Therefore his poetic voice reacts against Victorian effusion and his personal beliefs react against his genteel Unitarian upbringing, which Kevin Dettmar labels as "tepid" and "unsatisfying". Eliot returns aesthetically to the "impersonality" of the Eighteenth century and religiously to patterns of sin and expiation present in writers like Dante, Donne, Andrews, Herbert, etc. Many scholars acknowledge that Eliot's primary concerns before *The Waste Land* were shaped by moral and religious inquiries. Schuchard positions the early poet as "a man trying to work out the paradoxical nature of modern belief and writing poetry that records the struggle with mechanisms of a man in search of God" (68-69). Schuchard also marks 1916 as a shift when Eliot turns to more aesthetic rather than religious issues, at least until 1920. Eliot creates his polyvocal

aesthetic alongside of his religious questioning and at times the two can hardly be separated. Other early inspirations to Eliot were Arthur Symon's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which Eliot read in 1908, as well as the Bergson lectures that Eliot attended while in Paris in 1910-1911. In one of the only longer studies on Eliot's Notebook to date, Jayme Stayer contends that three important aspects of Eliot's later career can be traced retroactively to the early Notebook years. These aspects include a critical return to Eliot's early poetry as more than "drawing room entertainment" after the publication of the *The Waste Land* in 1922. Additionally, Stayer recognizes that the critical prose persona that Eliot cultivated in the London literary scene "shored up the base from which he wrote his poetry." Finally, Stayer acknowledges that the early Eliot demonstrates the poet's "absorption" in the cultural Zeitgeist, which is a characteristic that I highlight in my discussions of both the horizontal and vertical conversations. Most importantly, perhaps, is an early influence that nearly every scholar of Eliot acknowledges, that of Jules LaForgue. This earlier poet's irony gives rise to the quintessential Eliotic parataxis that pervades the early work through *The Waste Land*. As Schuchard contends, most of Eliot's poems between 1909 and 1911 have been dismissed as little more than Eliot attempting to perfect LaForgue's symbolist techniques (76).

Turning to the poetry of the Notebook, collected in Christopher Ricks's *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, I would like to revisit some of Eliot's early poetry as more than just an attempt to master symbolist techniques. Given the prolific scholarship on Eliot, the Notebook poems comprise a proportionately small number of the ones given critical attention, largely because of the dismissal that

Schuchard acknowledges. As outlined in the Introduction, Francis Dickey's scholarship comparing interiority and exteriority in Victorian and Modern portrait poems supports the claims of this chapter. Specifically, Dickey positions the Modernist's view of the self as "interspatial": "a self constituted by exchanges between and among sources (other people's ideas, works of art, objects), in contrast to the traditional concept of the free-standing individual constituted and governed by an interior soul or mind" (9). Eliot's polyvocal aesthetic invokes this Modernist understanding of the interspatial self and explores the ramifications of such a model. I will focus much of my discussion on one of the longer Notebook poems, "Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines)," in order to demonstrate how Eliot's early aesthetic challenges the notion of an essential speaking self by using aesthetic methods that mirror a fragmented model of the self. What is a singular speaking self that channels many voices? Anthony Cuda's scholarship on Eliot's "etherized patient" contends that the passive figures of Eliot's early poetry, including the marionette, demonstrate the poet's "lifelong attempt to find a way to respond to passion that neither ignores its threatening aspects nor elides its potential for creative and emotional transformation" (33). In the Notebook poems, over and again, we find references to marionettes and puppets, but also discussions on free will, fate, and self-control, which expand the horizons of Eliot's preoccupation with agency. This chapter will demonstrate that for Eliot, the fragmented self, constituted by multiple voices, lacks a sense of agency, and his polyvocal aesthetic offers an apt stylistic approach to render this model of selfhood and explore its consequences. The conclusion of this chapter will suggest that Eliot's marionettes and puppets in the Notebook poems eventually become



the impotent characters in *The Waste Land*, as passive automatons who wander the earth, “neither living nor dead.” Though the poem does not fully reconcile the problems of agency implicit with this interspatial self, it does gesture towards a solution via submission to the divine, which, paradoxically, involves an active form of surrender.

### **“Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines)”: Verandah Customs and Social Impotence**

Early incarnations of Eliot’s uses of polyvocality appear in many of his poems and poem fragments in *Inventions of the March Hare*. To place these works in chronological context with Sarah Piatt, Eliot and Piatt just overlap in terms of their publication records. Piatt published her last poems and Eliot began circling the European poetic scene in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Though the sections are disjointed in “Goldfish,” here Eliot’s aesthetic begins to coalesce. Throughout his early work, Eliot uses poetic methods that resemble both Browning’s unified dramatic monologues and Piatt’s call-and-response conversations. But Eliot takes his polyvocal experiments much further, often integrating both Browning’s and Piatt’s approaches by using a more defined dramatic monologue persona in conjunction with conversations between other less defined personas. This technique produces a more disjointed effect than Browning’s dramatic monologues, so that the temporal and spatial boundaries that surround even the more unified personas (like Prufrock) are much less discernible.

“Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines)” nicely demonstrates how the polyvocal conversations, both horizontally and vertically, explore questions of agency for

an essential speaking “self.” Throughout the poem, figures of marionettes, puppets, and automatons appear over and over again, especially in the vertical conversations. Additionally, this shorter four part Notebook poem stylistically anticipates Eliot’s famous longer works that appear in four or five parts, namely *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets*. These poems operate through interconnected parts, at times seemingly independent, but also wholly connected in a tonal or thematic disjointed narrative. Explicating “Goldfish,” an early example of Eliot’s signature form, allows us to observe the evolution from Eliot’s young poetic experimental voice into his later groundbreaking poetic contributions.

### **Part I and the Mechanical Dances**

I will approach this poem by examining the movements individually while also acknowledging the connections that provide unity throughout the whole. Starting with the first movement of “Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines), I can find only one pronoun in the horizontal movement of the poem, a “We” that appears in the third stanza. The short four stanza movement reads as follows:

Always the August evenings come  
With preparations for the waltz  
The hot verandah making room  
For all the reminiscent tunes  
--The *Merry Widow* and the rest—

That call, recall  
So many nights and afternoons—  
August, with all its faults!

And the waltzes turn, return;  
The *Chocolate Soldier* assaults  
The tired Sphinx of the physical.

What answer? We cannot discern.

And the waltzes turn, return,  
Float and fall,  
Like the cigarettes  
Of our marionettes  
Inconsequent, intolerable. (lines 1-17)

From that second personal inclusive pronoun in the third stanza, the reader can ascertain that the speaker considers him or herself part of a group. Given the prominence of the waltz in this movement, the diction invokes the circles of the dance with “call, recall,” “turn, return,” and again, “turn, return,” in the second through fourth stanzas. The meter is relatively uniform, with short mostly iambic tetrameter lines that also invoke a musical quality that mirrors a dance. The content dramatizes the musings of a higher social class, preparing for dances in the late summer, the circular rituals accompanying those preparations, punctuated by allusions to popular contemporary comic operas. Ricks reveals that Franz Lehar’s *The Merry Widow* (1905) was Eliot’s first Broadway musical, which he attended with his brother, Henry Ware Eliot. This show remained a favorite of Eliot’s, and an article in the *Harvard Advocate* explains the importance of *The Merry Widow Waltz* to Eliot’s generation. The article asserts that the waltz is “melodious, graceful, seductive,” but that only experienced musicians should attempt to play it, as it “requires complete mastery of all the resources of the piano, and an ideal grasp of the aesthetic principle, to interpret it adequately before an intelligent audience” (qtd in Ricks 148). Also according to Ricks, Oskar Straus’s *The Chocolate Soldier* (1908) is an adaptation of *Shaw’s Arms and the Man*, which Eliot expressed appreciation for in a letter to Henry Sherek (149). These contemporary theatrical references further entrench

the speaker and his or her social group in a contemporary time and space, one with which the young Eliot and his cadre would have been familiar. In the third stanza, the Sphinx reference sets up an implied question, which the last line mirrors with “What answer? We cannot discern.” This shift moves the reader into the final stanza that embodies a darker tonal shift, ending with “Inconsequent, intolerable.”

In terms of the horizontal polyvocality, this movement reads as one unified unnamed narrator who aligns himself with a like-minded group, hence the “We” in the third stanza. Tonally, the poem vacillates between a light-hearted attitude that mirrors the meter and some darker undertones that appear most forcefully in the final stanza. Starting with the title, “Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines),” Ricks compares its likeness to a Henry James quotation from *The American Scene*: ““As for the younger persons, of whom there were many, as for the young girls in especial, they were as perfectly in their element as goldfish in a crystal jar: a form of exhibition suggesting but one question or mystery. Was it they who had invented it, or had it inscrutably invented *them*”” (148). This paradox that the James allusion provides reappears as a motif throughout the whole poem. At the heart of this question lies a challenge to agency. How much power do these personas have while they circle, like fish in a crystal jar, the social rituals of these August afternoons? If they can intervene no more than the confined goldfish, then they merely exist for spectacle and decoration.

Given that Eliot eventually becomes known for his use of apt epigraphs to his longer poems, I propose that we approach this title as a type of epigraph, one that frames the poem as a whole. Positioning the James allusion as a framing technique, a central

question arises: “Was it they who had invented it, or had it inscrutably invented *them*?” This question cuts to the core of the first movement and then reappears in various forms in each of the subsequent movements. Looking at the third stanza with the Sphinx reference, the last line that reads: “What answer? We cannot discern,” which indicates there is an implied question in play here. The question supplied in the James quotation can act as the implied question to this indiscernible answer.

The James question is paradoxical in nature, invoking a circular query about the nature of man (in this particular case woman) and his or her relationship to the social environment. From the most basic standpoint, this question is one that deals with origins: are humans built with an inherent and immutable sense of self or are we creatures that evolve given the particular set of our environmental contexts? One approach to dissecting this query is to frame it through internal and external forces. Are human motivations the product of an internal force or, rather, of external forces like a social topos? For Eliot, this kind of question always involves the philosophical and, ultimately, religious realms. Though the poem does not offer any concrete answers, it does explore this and related issues through various contexts for the remainder of the poetic movements. Notions of fate and free will become particularly relevant as the poem progresses.

In that context, *Oedipus Rex* is a secondary text that consistently frames and informs “Goldfish,” particularly in Part IV. In this first movement, however, the Oedipus story becomes visible in the vertical conversation taking place in the third stanza with the Sphinx reference. In the myth, Oedipus solves the Sphinx’s riddle, breaks her curse on

the city, and becomes the king of Thebes. This ascent can only occur because Oedipus has just unwittingly killed his father, the previous king of Thebes, and with the ascent to the crown the last element of the prophecy from Delphi comes to fruition: Oedipus marries his mother Jocasta. Therefore his answering the Sphinx's riddle correctly and ascending to the throne does not represent an actual victory, but rather some sort of restoration of Oedipus's birthright, though now perverted because of Laius's and Jocasta's attempt to thwart fate. In the horizontal conversation, the Sphinx is assaulted by The Chocolate Soldier and the implied question cannot be answered. But if we position the James passage as a controlling question of "Goldfish," then here we see that the question also resonates with notions of fate and free will in the Oedipus story. This thread of fate and free will, as well as allusions to Oedipus, continue to inform the poem's content for the remainder of the poem.

A tangential thread present in the vertical conversation of this third stanza that reaffirms the importance of this question of fate and free will ushers in another important poet that reappears throughout the poem. The line "For meanings we cannot discern" alludes to Tennyson's *Tiresias*. Given the continuance of the *Oedipus Rex* frame and the looming presence of Tiresias in Part IV of "Goldfish," this thread of the vertical polyvocality seems particularly relevant. The Tennyson passage in question reads as follows:

I wish I were as in the years of old,  
While yet the blessed daylight made itself  
Ruddy thro' both the roofs of sight, and woke  
These eyes, now dull, but then so keen to seek  
The meanings ambush'd under all they saw,

The flight of birds, the flame of sacrifice,  
What omens may foreshadow fate to man  
And woman, and the secret of the Gods. (lines 1-8)

Through this passage, the importance of fate and free will are reaffirmed. Each new layer in the vertical conversation recursively reinforces the others. Sometimes these layers influence the poem's content in previously unacknowledged manners, but even if the new layer only serves to enhance an already established thread, it offers a polyvocal literary discourse that is unfettered by chronology.

The vertical conversation in the last stanza both builds upon the Tennyson thread in the previous stanza and also adds an additional framing element that segues nicely into part II. The stanza begins with "And the waltzes turn, return," which, like the third stanza, invokes the circularity of the dance itself and the recursivity of the larger thematic content. In addition to the waltz, it is worth noting that the circular phrases "call, recall" and "turn, return" work within the vertical Jamesian context of the title as well. The image (and motion) of the goldfish swimming in the crystal jar, on display, mirrors the physical movements of the waltz but adds an air of confinement and voyeurism. The fish swim interminably within a confined space, all the while being watched from the outside. In terms of perspective and persona, the horizontal speaker of this movement seems to be able to move from the perspective of outside observer to one that aligns with the "goldfish" in the crystal jar. This persona is not uniform throughout the poem, but seems to recur often enough to position him as a central speaker, one that both participates in and interprets the content. It is this ability to interpret, or judge, that separates him from the circling fish and allows him to end with the darker tone of the last line.

In this stanza, another Tennyson allusion enters the polyvocal conversation questioning notions of free will and fate. Here, the Tennyson allusion reinforces the idea of the natural course of events, such as seasons, as well as a desire for oblivion, perhaps acting as a shield from these natural events. The context of the Tennyson reference occurs in the third “Choric Song” of *The Lotos-Eaters* and outlines the natural production of an apple, from bud to fruit.<sup>2</sup> The stanza emphasizes the cyclic movements of both night and day, as well as the larger circular movements of time’s passing through the seasons:

Lo! In the middle of the wood,  
The folded leaf is woo’d from out the bud,  
With winds upon the branch, and there  
Grows green and borad, and takes no care,  
Sun-steep’d at noon, and in the moon  
Nightly dew-fed; and turning yellow  
Falls, and floats adown the air.  
Lo! Sweeten’d with the summer light,  
The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,  
Drops in a silent autumn night. (lines 70-83)

This latest incarnation of a circular pattern reinforces the circular movement of the waltz and fish swimming in a vase, but this time the cyclic movement involves an inescapable temporal element, set into motion by the natural progression of spring to autumn.

Thematically, the content of *The Lotos-Eaters* ushers in a desire for oblivion, an escape from the hardships of existence, into the musings of preparations for the waltz on those August nights. The questions of free-will and fate are now tempered by the boundaries of consciousness. The apple blossom, floating and falling, operates outside the boundaries

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<sup>2</sup> See Ricks (150).



of consciousness in a natural rhythm untouched by man's free will. Considering that this persona views himself as both a member of the social group and their almost mechanical participation within the social milieu and, also, as a conscious critic of those same mechanical movements, this vertical thread expresses a desire for a natural rhythm outside of the bounds of consciousness. The dislocated persona simultaneously swims in the jar and observes from the outside.

The next layer present in this vertical conversation emphasizes the mechanical nature of the preparations for the waltz with an allusion to John Addington Symonds *In the Key of Blue*.<sup>3</sup> The relevant passage adds an element of class awareness to this vertical conversation:

with blurred A grimy tavern walls,  
Where dingy lamplight floats and falls  
On working men and women, clad  
In sober watched, umber sad.  
Two viols and one 'cello scream  
Waltz music through the smoke and steam: (8)

This vertical layer shifts from the idyllic woods of the Tennyson reference into the working class industrial landscape, a place where Eliot eventually finds a home for *The Waste Land*. Here, the "waltz" plays through the regular intervals of the steam engines' songs. This juxtaposition of the different types of waltzes carries with it a critique of the shallowness involved in the leisure class waltz mechanics.

The next participant in this vertical conversation extends the mechanical context to apply to the dancers as well as the dance. Immediately following "Floats and falls,"

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<sup>3</sup> Ricks (150).

we read “Like the cigarettes / Of our marionettes,” which alludes to Oscar Wilde’s “The Harlot’s House.”<sup>4</sup> In this earlier work, Wilde’s speaker and his group find themselves, seemingly unwittingly, in the midst of a brothel. The speaker positions the interactions between the harlots and their customers as mechanical dancers, almost spectral in their movements. These mechanical exchanges taking place are devoid of real feelings, occurring within the established patterns of a dance—both the quadrille and the waltz are invoked at various points of the poem. As the speaker and his “love” are watching the exchanges unfold, his love chooses to leave him in order to participate. Here are the last stanzas of “The Harlot’s House,” all of which are relevant to this vertical thread in “Goldfish”:

Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed  
A phantom lover to her breast,  
Sometimes they seemed to try to sing.

Sometimes a horrible marionette  
Came out, and smoked its cigarette  
Upon the steps like a live thing.

Then, turning to my love, I said,  
‘The dead are dancing with the dead,  
The dust is whirling with the dust.’

But she—she heard the violin,  
And left my side, and entered in:  
Love passed into the house of lust.

Then suddenly the tune went false,  
The dancers wearied of the waltz,  
The shadows ceased to wheel and whirl.

And down the long and silent street,

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<sup>4</sup> Ricks (150).

The dawn, with silver-sandalled feet,  
Crept like a frightened girl. (lines 19-36)

In Wilde's lyrical iambic tetrameter lines, a form which Eliot uses throughout much of this first movement in "Goldfish," love is positioned in opposition to sex, which becomes a spectral and mechanical dance conducted under the cover of darkness. Wilde's persona loses his "love" to this dance, which suggests its power over the human condition of feeling, when "love passed into the house of lust." In this case, love and lust are opposed to each other, and the power of lust ultimately corrupts the former. The creeping light in the last stanza approaches the carnal scene hesitantly, almost as if it is scared of what it might find. Throughout this scene, Wilde refers to the participants as clockwork puppets, marionettes, the dead, and dancers; in doing so, he emphasizes the automatic human response to sex and lust and deemphasizes the individual emotional capacity of a human. Emotions cannot stand up against the power of lust, and Wilde equates this power with the destructive force of death rather than the generative force of life. In essence, this is an inversion of procreative power of sex. The automatons who succumb to this force are members of "the dead." The "dancers" of this "waltz" are participating in something that seems beyond their control.

After examining all of the voices of the last stanza in conversation with each other, I offer a possible answer to the question posed in the Jamesian title: "Was it they who had invented it, or had it inscrutably invented *them*?" Given the power behind the force of lust in Wilde's poem, the answer suggests that free will does not stand a chance against this more lurid impulse. In both the vertical and horizontal conversations we find

narrating personas who both participate and judge the actions of the other characters, so some room for agency within these circumstances may exist. But generally, the primal pull of lust prevails. When I compare the waltz of “Goldfish” with Wilde’s waltz, the mechanical preparations of August nights take on a perverse air, devoid of human emotion. This vertical thread recurs throughout “Goldfish,” as Eliot continually invokes images of puppets and marionettes, suggesting that a larger force manipulates the mechanical characters within both the horizontal and vertical conversations.

Representations of love throughout the poem continue to turn towards the perverse or unnatural, ultimately becoming both “Inconsequent,” and “intolerable.” Eventually, this combination of mechanical human figures, devoid of agency, and perverse romantic activity coalesce in the impotent characters of *The Waste Land*.

## **Part II: Forever Fixed In a Painting**

The second movement of “Goldfish” is entitled “Embarquement pour Cythere.” The title “Embarquement pour Cythere” directly invokes the 1717 Jean-Antoine Watteau painting. In this painting, a group makes preparations to leave the Greek island of Cythera, thought to be the birthplace of Venus. The painting portrays couples in various embraces, some walking hand-in-hand towards the departing boat while others are still entangled at the edge of the woods. Cupids fly around amidst the people, indicating the presence and predominance of love and passion. Ostensibly, as evening draws close, this group is departing the island after a day of love, excess, and pleasure.

One of the most fruitful entry points to this movement in light of polyvocality is the notion that Eliot's speakers dramatize the painting itself. Because the opening line addresses the "Ladies" of the painting, we can assume that the persona in the first stanza is likely male. The collective second person pronouns throughout this section reinforce the all-inclusive position(s) of the speaker(s). The short fifteen line section reads as follows:

Ladies, the moon is on its way!  
Is everybody here?  
And the sandwiches and ginger beer?  
If so, let us embark—  
The night is anything but dark,  
Almost as clear as day.

It's utterly illogical  
Our making such a start, indeed  
And thinking that we must return.

Oh no! why should we not proceed  
(As long as a cigarette will burn  
When you light it at the evening star)  
To porcelain land, what avatar  
Where blue-delft-romance is the law.

Philosophy through a paper straw!

Though it is impossible to assign definitive personas to these lines, given the disparate tonal qualities of the alternating stanzas, there seem to be at least two distinct positions represented. Other than in the first stanza, it is impossible to assign gender qualities to the work, but the two tonal variations work against each other so that we read one enthusiastic perspective against a more skeptical one. Much like Piatt's dialogue poems between an experienced persona and naïve one, Eliot juxtaposes opposing views, only he

situates those views within a confirmed visual group so that the opposing positions could be between two members of the group or two positions (having multiple advocates) within the group. This represents an evolution in the thread that I am tracing through Eliot's approach. In one regard, we can read this poem's speaker as the unified persona of the painting. The two distinct positions invoked in the alternating stanzas represent at least two of the characters within the group and possibly more. Therefore, we can begin to see how he uses polyvocality to fragment the spatial planes of context for this painting.

Eliot does not necessarily draw upon Watteau alone when constructing these verses. Several other artists and writers, more directly influential to Eliot, invoke the same scene represented in the 1717 painting. Perhaps more influential to Eliot, Baudelaire includes a direct apostrophe to Watteau in his 1857 "*Les Phares*" and also writes "*Un Voyage a Cythere*," an account of the scene from the same Watteau painting. Eliot was clearly familiar with the Baudelaire adaptation because he quotes from it directly in his essay, "Baudelaire in Our Time." Verlaine also invokes the Watteau painting in his 1869 "*Cythere*" and Laforgue revisits the scene again in his 1890 version of "*Cythere*." Arthur Symons quotes from Laforgue's adaptation in his influential *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* in 1899.<sup>5</sup> Eliot was greatly influenced by this group of French poets; we can trace allusions in many of Eliot's early works directly back to Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Laforgue. Therefore, though Eliot clearly dramatizes Watteau's painting in this poem segment, he also enters an established conversation

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive explanation of the Cythera myth influence on Eliot via nineteenth-century French poets, see Ricks's (151-154).

between his French influences. This aesthetic approach, with both the fragmented speakers and the vertical conversations, conveys an attitude and scene that amounts to more than just a cacophony of voices, much like the expression of consciousness to which Mayer alludes. The dramatized scene of this section enhances and reinforces the lack of agency that the other personas in this poem exhibit. Though there are no explicit references to marionettes here, the conversations narrate a two-dimensional scene. These characters are forever stuck in a specific temporal and spatial context, with no options for movement or decisive action. Their journey is forever fixed with no chance for completion. This section is unique to the poem, seemingly unrelated to the other three movements. There are more voices represented here on the horizontal level, and our central narrating persona in the other movements does not seem to be present. But the lack of agency that two-dimensional characters evince reinforces the lack of agency that dominates the entire poem. Indeed, these characters have even less agency than others because of their fixed temporal and spatial contexts.

### **Part III: August Afternoons on the Stage**

After the voyage interlude in the second movement, Part III of “Goldfish” directly reconnects to the first movement, revisiting the questions and circumstances posed in section one. Returning to the mechanical regimen, Part III takes us back to those August nights. This short movement reads:

On every sultry afternoon  
Verandah customs have the call

White flannel ceremonial  
With cakes and tea  
And guesses at eternal truths  
Sounding the depths with a silver spoon  
And dusty roses, crickets, sunlight on the sea  
And all.

And should you ever hesitate  
Among such charming scenes—  
Essence of summer magazines—  
Hesitate, and estimate  
How much is simple accident  
How much one knows  
How much one means  
Well! among many apophthegms  
Here's one that goes—  
Play to your conscience, through the maze  
Of means and ways  
And wear the crown of your ideal  
Bays  
And rose. (lines 1-22)

This passage appears to have the same narrator as Part I. However, the persona in the first movement included himself in the group with the pronoun “we” in the third stanza and, here, he seems to be separating himself from the group. The “you” and “your” appearing in the second stanza demonstrates this newfound separation. If we return to the metaphor of the fish swimming in the bowl, now the persona operates on the outside only, commenting on the scene from a removed perspective.

The first stanza also invokes scenes that are present in the first stanza of Part I through both diction and content. In Part I, we accessed the upper class milieu through the preparations for a night of dancing with: “Always the August evenings come / With preparations for the waltz / The hot verandah making room / For all the reminiscent tunes” (lines 1-4). The first few lines of Part III position us at an earlier point in the day



than the evening preparations, though likely within the same group. The two sections begin with “Always” and “On every,” which emphasizes the temporal consistency that Eliot attributes to these scenes. These patterns are unchanging, though in Part III the afternoons are “sultry,” a word that warrants attention since that adds a new element to these verandah scenes. The “verandah customs” echo the “hot verandah” of the earlier section, but since those afternoons have now become sultry, the air is not only hot in temperature, but also sexually charged. These verandah customs now mirror the mechanical soirees of Wilde’s harlot house in the end of Part I. Like the observer in the Wilde poem, this persona does not participate in the more erotic elements of the scene. Though Eliot does not position this persona as a puppet or marionette, his inability to participate fully in these rituals aligns him with that type of passivity. It is almost as if the ability to comment upon the scene precludes his participation.

It is impossible to continue discussing this passive persona without drawing attention to the similarity of diction between this stanza and Prufrock. The “White flannel ceremonial / With cakes and tea / And guesses at eternal truths / Sounding the depths with a silver spoon” mirror both scenes and tones present in Eliot’s famous early poem. And, though the two works are obviously quite different, they tackle similar sets of problems. Indeed, one could position the main persona of “Goldfish” as an earlier, less developed, version of J. Alfred Prufrock, particularly given the participant/observer stance that this persona straddles. The “white flannel ceremonials” eventually appear as Prufrock’s “white flannel trousers” that he wears rolled while walking on the beach. The cakes and tea that appear in this stanza resonate with all the “tea and cakes and ices” that

pervade in the social sphere of Prufrock. And, “Sounding the depths with a silver spoon” anticipates Prufrock’s measuring out his life in coffee spoons throughout the evenings, mornings, and afternoons. The two poems are guided by similar scenes and conflicts, along with a persona who provides meta-commentary on the ceremonial regimen of the upper class. However, Prufrock speaks through the Brownian model of the dramatic monologue and as such solely dramatizes the poem’s content. “Goldfish’s” central persona is more diffuse, surfacing to narrate certain poem segments only to disappear entirely in others.

In a tone that undercuts any attempt to place serious consideration upon these afternoon scenes, the “Goldfish” persona relates that these teas involve “guesses at eternal truths” and “sounding the depths with a silver spoon.” At the very least tongue-and-cheek, and at the most caustic, this tone implicitly mocks the upper class’s ability to address serious subjects. Diction such as “guesses” implies a certain naivete in traversing this philosophical terrain and the sibilant line “sounding the depths with a silver spoon,” which invokes the practice of measuring the depth of water, suggests that a silver spoon, or their wealth and vanity, reinforces their naivete. The last lines: “And dusty roses, crickets, sunlight on the sea, And all,” read as enigmatic, though these symbols appear again in Eliot’s later poetry, with the dusty roses figuring prominently in “Burnt Norton” and the sound of crickets framing the final scene of *The Waste Land*.

The longer second stanza of Part III invokes some similar aesthetic techniques present in Part I as well:

And should you ever hesitate  
Among such charming scenes—  
Essence of summer magazines—  
Hesitate, and estimate  
How much is simple accident  
How much one knows  
How much one means  
Well! among many apophthegms  
Here's one that goes—  
Play to your conscience, through the maze  
Of means and ways  
And wear the crown of your ideal  
Bays  
And rose. (lines 9-22)

Here, Eliot emphasizes repetitive phrases like “hesitate and estimate” that parallel the “turn and return” and “call and recall” patterns used in Part I. The anaphora in the middle of the stanza also operates through repetition, questioning the “you” addressed here as a representative member of this leisure class. The title is invoked as an appositive phrase, with “Essence of summer magazines” further defining “such charming scenes.” The anaphoristic questions presumably relate back to the “guesses at eternal truths” and “sounding the depths with a silver spoon” lines in the first stanza, suggesting that the tone here likely extends the mocking one present in the first stanza as well. The answer to these questions can be found “among the many apophthegms,” or aphorisms, and advises the addressee to “play” to his or her conscience while navigating the “maze.” The fact that this advice is given through an aphoristic saying further advances the interpretation that these conversations lack any genuine depth. The verb “play” enhances this superficial quality and also connotes a competitive aspect, as if the members are “playing” a game, one that requires calculated moves on behalf of the participants. The

second part of the aphorism, “And wear the crown of your ideal / Bays / and rose” suggests a sort of victor in this superficial game, instructing the player to wear a “crown” of his or her ideals, or perhaps the stances he or she assumes while guessing at the eternal truths. Though the “bays” are enigmatic, it’s possible the “rose” invokes the “dusty roses” at the end of the first stanza.

Regarding the vertical conversations present in Part III, I will highlight several threads that augment the horizontal movements and also add insight into this movement’s relationship to Part I. Throughout the two stanzas, the vertical conversations contain multiple allusions to stage acting and critique, which reinforces the aphoristic advice to “play” to your conscience in the second stanza. “Guesses at eternal truths” possibly invokes Arthur Symons’s *Plays, Acting, and Music* (1909), where Symons’s uses the phrase “guesses at truth.”<sup>6</sup> In a review of the actress Rejane’s techniques, Symons states:

In "Sapho" or "Zaza" she speaks the language of the senses, no more; and her acting reminds you of all that you may possibly have forgotten of how the senses speak when they speak through an ignorant woman in love. It is like an accusing confirmation of some of one's guesses at truth, before the realities of the flesh and of the affections of the flesh. Scepticism is no longer possible: here, in "Sapho," is a woman who flagellates herself before her lover as the penitent flagellates himself before God. In the scene where her lover repulses her last attempt to win him back, there is a convulsive movement of the body, as she lets herself sink to the ground at his feet, which is like the movement of one who is going to be [41]sick: it renders, with a ghastly truth to nature, the abject collapse of the body under overpowering emotion. (40)

The line directly preceding the “guesses at truth” is particularly relevant to this vertical thread. Here, the reference to “how the senses speak when they speak through an

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<sup>6</sup> Ricks (155).

ignorant woman in love,” signals a simile when compared to an “accusing confirmation of some of one’s guesses at truth, before the realities of the flesh and of and of the affections of the flesh.” Given the horizontal movement of these lines that invoke sultry verandah tea time, this vertical thread enhances the triviality of the conversations, but builds upon earlier vertical conversations that speak to the overwhelming pull of the erotic. The “realities of the flesh” in this passage also invoke the carnal scenes that follow these ceremonies, which recall the vertical scene of Wilde’s “The Harlot House.” Though the horizontal movement reads as merely mocking, these vertical threads add a much more sinister quality to these verandah customs. The notion that these scenes are scripted, as if on a stage, reinforces the passivity of the players. These participants exhibit little to no conscious volition in their actions, which aligns them with the puppets and marionettes in other vertical conversations that cannot actively intervene in their circumstances. There is no agency to be found here. Implicitly, Eliot returns to the question: if not with individuals, then where does agency lie?

If we return to the question posed in the title by the James passage, and now echoed here in the second stanza with “Essence of summer magazines,” we can also read the anaphoristic questions as speaking to that paradox. The James passage asks: “Was it they who had invented it, or it inscrutably invented *them*?” Pairing that question with “How much is simple accident / How much one knows / How much one means,” emphasizes the recursive nature of Parts I and III. Additionally, this vertical thread reinforces the hesitancy that the Prufrockian persona reads into these scenes. Now that the persona has removed himself from participating, he positions these interchanges as a

staged play. The line “How much is simple accident” is yet another allusion to Symons’s *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906), where in a review of a stage performance Symons writes: “But in what is incalculable there may be equal parts of inspiration and of accident. How much, in Mr. Craig’s staging, is inspiration, how much is accident”.<sup>7</sup> In these verandah customs, this persona cannot discern between the players’ intentional moves and their inconsequential chatter, rendering him all the more impotent in this scene. He cannot participate because he cannot read the script, so to speak, especially when confronted with the leisure class women. The polyvocal method that Eliot uses to render this scene reflects the fragmented nature of the “self” that provides little to no agency.

One final vertical conversation I want to highlight compares the aphoristic “play to conscience” line to the infamous line from Hamlet: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (Act II, Scene iii).<sup>8</sup> In this section, Hamlet does not know who killed his father, so he stages a similar enactment in order to observe the reactions of his uncle, hoping to discover the murderer. If we take the context of this section of Hamlet and apply it to the staging present in the vertical conversation of this movement, then, potentially, we can read a similar intent behind the bewildered persona. Though he does not participate, if the persona watches the staging and the participants’ reactions, then perhaps, like Hamlet, he can glean the intentions behind the players’ moves. This suggests that though the persona derides all of the trivial interchanges, he may still want to participate in the rituals, at least in terms of reading the intentions. The fact that the context of Hamlet involves a murder lends a more serious air to these

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<sup>7</sup> Ricks (156).

<sup>8</sup> Ricks (156-7).

verandah customs. For this persona at least, these leisure class rituals are simultaneously trivial, enigmatic, lurid, but also potentially of dire consequence. Leading into the last section of “Goldfish,” this fragmented persona yearns for more active involvement, though the involvement remains analytical. In the larger context, then, the diffuse “self” may long for the agency to intervene and is prevented from doing so because of his passive analytical position.

#### **Part IV: Marionettes and “Problems of the Soul”**

The aesthetic of the final section of “Goldfish” at first appears to be more unified because of the speaking “I” found in the first stanza, though that unity breaks down in the second and third stanzas. This persona seems to be the same diffuse persona that narrates the first and third sections of the poem. Because the polyvocality disrupts the speaking persona in this closing poem section, we will examine it stanza by stanza. The first:

Among the debris of the year  
Of which the autumn takes its toll:--  
Old letters, programmes, unpaid bills  
Photographs, tennis shoes, and more,  
Ties, postal cards, the mass that fills  
The limbo of a bureau drawer—  
Of which October takes its toll  
Among the debris of the year  
I find this headed “Barcarolle”. (lines 1-9)

Here, the scene invokes a domestic space, ostensibly someone rummaging through “the mass that fills the limbo of a bureau drawer” on an October day. The narrator(s) have moved past the August afternoons of the first several sections, and the social “season”

seems to have come to a close. Looking over all the odds and ends collected in the drawer, the persona becomes interested in a relic entitled “Barcarolle.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of a “Barcarolle” includes two connected but distinct manifestations: “an Italian boatman” or “A song sung by Venetian barcaruoli as they row their gondolas; a song or piece of music composed in imitation or reminiscence of such songs.”<sup>9</sup> Keeping both definitions in mind is helpful when progressing through the polyvocal movements of the poem, particularly in the third stanza.

The second stanza shifts from the persona’s voice to a written account of the “Barcarolle” mentioned in the first stanza:

‘Along the wet paths of the sea  
A crowd of barking waves pursue  
Bearing what consequence to you  
And me.  
The neuropathic winds renew  
Like marionettes who leave their graves  
Walking the waves  
Bringing the news from either Pole  
Or knowledge of the fourth dimension:  
‘We beg to call to your attention’  
‘Some minor problems of the soul.’ (lines 10-20)

The beginning quotation marks signal the shift in voice, though this relic from the year ostensibly is written. With the Barcarolle allusion, this stanza represents both something written and sung, and though the reader cannot know who is singing, we can assume that the persona from stanza one reads the song. Because of this shift in voice, the pronouns also become more ambiguous. The “you” and “me” appearing in the first few lines could

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<sup>9</sup> Ricks cites the first definition (158), but does not include the second one from the *OED* entry.



reference the “I” in stanza one, could refer to two completely different entities relevant to the written context of the relic, could relate outwards to include the reader and the unknown speaker, or could simultaneously invoke all of these possibilities depending on the layer on which the reader chooses to focus. The poem is layered with voices both horizontally in terms of shifting voices that dramatize the poem’s content, as well as vertically because of allusions that Eliot layers within nearly every line.

The beginning quotation signals the shift to the written song. Though our “I” persona might be “reading” this to us through his or her perception, the words on the page (encompassing the second stanza) are not representative of the initial persona’s immediate thought patterns. These words have already been produced, either by the persona at an earlier date or by someone else entirely. The words’ relevance to the persona’s immediate state of mind is prescient, but the song existed before this October day. The shift from the “I” persona in the first stanza to the written material in the second stanza represents at least two “speakers” within the first ten lines.

In recalling the definition of “Barcarolle,” the context shifts to one of nautical origins, with the written words representing either the voice of the sailor or a song written in a reminiscent style of the Barcarolle. The style of the Barcarolle evolves from traditional Italian folk music of the Venetian gondoliers and generally follows the medium tempo of the rhythmic strokes in the water. In terms of content, the barcarolle tradition invokes sentimentality and romance. Eventually the barcarolle style became popularized by opera and Romantic composers, including Chopin. Generally, Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffman* (1881) is attributed with first popularizing the

barcarolle style. This opera's content likely informs this stanza, especially given the "marionettes who leave their graves" reference, which loosely corresponds to actions that take place in the opera. Additionally, Chopin composed Op. 60 in the barcarolle style and the Italian love song was, briefly, a subject of nineteenth-century French poets.<sup>10</sup> Horizontally, here, the conversations operate multi-generically through spoken, written, and possibly singing voices (with spoken words from "the neuropathic winds" making an appearance in the last two lines of the stanza). Vertically, however, the conversations reference elements ranging from seventeenth-century Italian gondolier songs to nineteenth-century operas and French poetry.

It is worthy to note that the content of the written "Barcarolle" contradicts the traditional sentimental and romantic tones of the gondolier's song. Though the content is somewhat abstract here, it is decidedly more serious in tone than a sweet love song. This juxtaposition between a traditional form and ironic content becomes one of Eliot's signatures in his early work, particularly with *Prufrock*. Instead of a romantic Barcarolle, we have something that is entitled such but, rather, invokes nervous energy and uncertainty. In short, rather than being somewhat life-affirming (as a love song), the tone in this stanza is more anxious. The pursuit by the "barking waves," the "neuropathic winds," and the "marionettes who leave their graves" do not conjure comforting or sentimental images. Ostensibly spoken by the "neuropathic winds," the last two lines of the stanza convey a central message. All of these pursuers seek the same outcome: "'We beg to call to your attention / 'Some minor problems of the soul'" (lines 19-20).

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<sup>10</sup> Ricks (158-9).

Problems of the soul, then, become the larger guiding principle of this stanza, and, arguably, of the entire poem.

Tracing the vertical conversation, this stanza reinforces that notion and perhaps gives us insight into what the “minor” soul problems of the poem could be. We find layer upon layer of allusions dealing the “barking waves” alone, ranging from Swineburne to Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* to, most saliently, Milton’s *Comus*. In *Comus*, the relevant lines are: “Scylla wept, / And chid her barking waves into attention” (lines 257-8).<sup>11</sup> This allusion also invokes the classic Scylla and Charibdis dichotomy, appearing in many Greek myths. The tone and content of these two distinct allusions color Eliot’s tone and content as well. In this inverted Barcarolle song, Eliot maintains the nautical setting but unsettles the sentimentality. If the barking waves reference indeed invokes Milton, then one must take into account the story of *Comus*, which positions the namesake as a trickster figure set to destroy a young maiden’s chastity. The Greek myth of Scylla resonates with the allusion by calling forth images of the dogs supposedly chained to Scylla’s neck when Circe changes her into a monster (over conflict in a love triangle). Since both Scylla and Circe are known for their sordid love triangle, and Comus, the trickster figure, attempts to steal a young maiden’s virtue, this vertical conversation suggests a tension between sexual purity, lust, and deceit. The 1857 *OED* definition of neuropathic means: “Relating to, or caused or distinguished by nervous disease or functional weakness of the nervous system” (159).<sup>12</sup> Again, diction such as

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<sup>11</sup> Ricks (159).

<sup>12</sup> Ricks (159).

“neuropathic” is at odds with the title “Barcarolle,” which should be soothing and uplifting rather than anxiety-inducing.

Another element of the vertical conversation to note is the “marionettes who leave their graves” reference, which recalls the section above that explains that Barcarolle songs were made popular by Offenbach’s 1861 *The Tales of Hoffman*.<sup>13</sup> In this opera, Poetry, the muse, visits Hoffman in order to gain his sustained love. The three acts are divided into tales of Hoffman’s past loves—all of which are in some way unnatural and unsuccessful. The particular story of interest in this stanza’s context is the fact that Hoffman falls in love with a mechanical doll who is under someone else’s control. Hoffman receives a pair of magic glasses that impede his perception so that he thinks the mechanical doll is human, until the magic glasses are shattered. Here again we find the important idea that marionettes and mechanical dolls are under someone else’s control. If the neuropathic winds bring news like marionettes who are under someone else’s control, then the question becomes, who is actually in control here? What are the consequences brought to the “you and me” in the first several lines of this stanza? Who is bringing them? Additionally, the opera’s storyline of some type of unnatural or unsuccessful love story resonates poignantly with the previous allusions and the tension of sexual impurity.

Eliot’s Notebook poems and other early works consistently reflect anxieties about sexual impulses and interactions between the sexes. Jamie Stayer acknowledges that one of Eliot’s primary concerns in the Notebook is “the problem of sexual impulse and how to negotiate between its insistent claims and socially proper modes of expression and

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<sup>13</sup> Ricks (158-9).

behavior” (112). Reaching a similar conclusion, Helen Vendler maintains that Eliot’s early voice arises from speech and behavioral patterns present in his upper-class Protestant upbringing. Within this context, Vendler argues that “women were confined to virginal modesty coupled with acceptable superficial ‘cultural’ interests” (86). The women of *Prufrock*, coming and going, speaking of Michelangelo, invoke this notion. However, the “women” in the “Goldfish,” largely accessible through Eliot’s vertical conversation, represent something more threatening. Though there are no female pronouns present, the vertical conversation suggests that a troubled romantic relationship informs this stanza.

By tracing the movements of the vertical conversation, I locate a sexually charged thread, one that reinforces the inversion of the traditional love song. Eliot uses this type of inversion, where the form and the content work contrapuntally in an ironic manner, often, and most famously in “*Prufrock*.” In this scenario, the vertical conversation intertwines narratives of sexual impurity, lust, and corruption by invoking Scylla, Circe, and Comus. After all, Scylla, at one point beautiful and desired, morphed into a dangerous monster because of Circe’s jealousy. Circe, a sorcerous, represents jealousy in its most lurid form. Both female figures suggest danger and deceit. Comus, a male figure present in this conversation, seeks to sexually corrupt a chaste young maiden. If we add into the conversation the Offenbach story that revolves around unsuccessful romantic relationships, this thread of corruption becomes even stronger. Given this vertical conversation, then, as the neuropathic winds bring forth the “minor problems of the soul,” it does not seem a stretch to read these soul problems as ones fraught with

sexual abnormalities. As “Goldfish” draws to a close, the puppets, marionettes, stage actors, “dead” dancers, and automatons draw our attention to an explicit problem with self-control. The polyvocal aesthetic that Eliot uses questions the notion of an essential speaking self, and, as such, implicitly questions the bounds of agency and control. Given that many of these references deal with sexual anxieties, especially in the last section, we can read these problems of agency as incorporating sexual anxieties as well. Looking to the conclusion of “Goldfish,” these marionette figures and the sexual dysfunction present in the polyvocal conversations eventually lead us to the characters and circumstances of *The Waste Land*.

The poem concludes with dialogue, presumably spoken by the neuropathic winds. In the previous extended simile, Eliot likens the neuropathic winds to the marionettes who leave their graves:

The neuropathic winds renew  
Like marionettes who leave their graves  
Walking the waves  
Bringing the news from either Pole  
Or knowledge of the fourth dimension:  
‘We beg to call to you attention’  
‘Some minor problems of the soul.’ (lines 14-20)

The vertical conversation of these lines recalls the Offenbach reference with the mechanical dolls as well as the disillusionment that came with the magic glasses. The “walking the waves” allusion can be attributed to Milton’s *Lycidas* as well.<sup>14</sup> Given the *Comus* reference in the previous lines, it seems prudent to add this thread into the vertical

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<sup>14</sup> Ricks (160).

conversation. The context for the *Lycidas* allusion (line 173) invokes the consistency of the rising and setting of the sun over the water and, also, Jesus walking on the water. In the lines that follow, *Lycidas* hears the songs of angels and saints from heaven. The pattern of the sun's daily ascent and descent resonates with the neuropathic winds and their renewal. Instead of songs from heaven, however, here we have news from either Pole or knowledge of the fourth dimension. Eliot may invoke both Browning and Tennyson here regarding "bringing the news," but perhaps more relevant to this thread of the vertical conversation, are the polar explorations of Peary, Amundsen, and Shackleton, which made headlines in 1909-10.<sup>15</sup>

John T. Mayer suggests this connection in *T. S. Eliot's Silent Voices*, noting that Eliot was impressed enough by these explorations that he mentions them in the Notes to *The Waste Land* a decade later and uses an exploration incident in part V of the poem. Mayer characterizes these explorations as tales of "adventure, courage, death, and discovery" (61). However, the placement of these lines, following the "walking the waves" *Lycidas* allusion, suggests that we must also consider the polarized duality of heaven and hell in this formulation. The "news," coming from two opposite locations then involves an esoteric, perhaps spiritual, element as well. Placing this in context with the next line, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the fourth dimension as: "a supposed or assumed dimension, additional to length, breadth, and thickness." Also particularly relevant in this context is Bertrand Russell's thoughts on the fourth dimension from 1904: "The merit of speculations on the fourth dimension . . . is chiefly that they stimulate the

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<sup>15</sup> Ricks (160).

imagination, and free the intellect from the shackles of the actual.”<sup>16</sup> This thread reinforces the esoteric or spiritual nature of the polar news, implying that the intellect must be unfettered (like the winds) from the actual, the everyday routine, in order to ponder the “minor problems of the soul.” Placed in context with the marionette figures, the neuropathic winds renew, but at whose bidding? Who controls the winds like marionettes? The simile suggests that a higher power manipulates these forces, especially when paired with Jesus’s “walking the waves” and the attention drawn to minor soul problems, which directs us back to questions of agency. Does Russell’s knowledge of the fourth dimension give us the answer here? Perhaps the intellect must be freed from the “shackles of the actual” in order to claim any agency, in order to operate beyond the scope of marionettes. The polyvocal conversations in this stanza imply that the key to self-control might just be an unshackled imagination.

The speaker of “Goldfish’s” concluding stanza moves away from the voice of the neuropathic winds and returns to our previous “I” persona. Continuing with the nautically themed language from the Barcarolle, he addresses a second person, perhaps a romantic interest, given the whole poem’s secondary focus on relationships:

--Your seamanship is very neat  
You scan the clouds, as if you knew,  
Your language nautical, complete:  
There’s nothing left for me to do.  
And while you give the wheel a twist  
I gladly leave the rest to fate  
And contemplate  
The aged sybil in your eyes  
At the four crossroads of the world

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<sup>16</sup> Ricks (160).



Whose oracle replies:--  
'These problems seem importunate  
But after all do not exist.' (lines 21-32)

Eliot uses the neat/complete end rhymes several times in Notebook poems, both in "Mandarins" and "Suite Clownesque." Given Eliot's penchant for reiterating weighty allusions in various poems composed around the same time, it is worth noting, briefly, how those words work in the context of the other poems. In "Mandarins," the "complete" alludes to Shakespeare's Henry VIII, I ii 118-19, with King Henry describing the Earl of Buckingham: "This man so complete, / Who was enrolled 'mongst wonders."<sup>17</sup> In the lines that follow, however, Henry derides Buckingham for directing his prodigious talents towards evil, so that he "has become as black as if besmeared in hell" (123-4). In "Suite Clownesque," the neat/complete reference invokes the Shakespearian allusion above and also encompasses an allusion from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with the Invocation to light in the opening of Book III.<sup>18</sup> The vertical conversation that includes these allusions suggests several possible threads that seem almost at odds with each other. The Shakespearian reference invokes a talented individual who has chosen to direct his "graces" towards evil and the Miltonic reference invokes an invocation to the muse, the "holy light," which resides only in God. Because this stanza grapples with notions of fate, these references reinforce the religious uncertainty that surfaces in the previous stanza. There is both a call to the "holy light" for guidance as well as a misguided turn of a talented man who becomes "besmeared in hell." The

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<sup>17</sup> Ricks (127-8).

<sup>18</sup> Ricks (173-4).

tension between these two ideas suggests the desire for knowledge, perhaps the knowledge from the Fourth Dimension, but a misdirection or misappropriation of such knowledge. Whatever the human mind comprehends regarding the esoteric, we never quite get it right. Since this abstract persona addresses someone in this stanza who “scans the clouds, as if you knew,” the “you” here is in some way implicated in the misinterpretation, even if it is the “I” speaker who ultimately misinterprets.

Line 24 asserts the “I” persona’s helplessness in this situation with “There’s nothing left for me to do.” Grappling with forces larger than one can comprehend, the persona here is content to “leave the rest to fate.” The “you” being addressed, however, wants to actively intervene. In lines that anticipate sections of *The Waste Land* (almost verbatim), the second person addressed here takes a definitive action, arguably the only action taken in section IV up to this point. In line 25 the addressee gives the wheel a twist, which speaks to several different situations. Within the confines of the poem’s nautical context, giving the wheel a twist speaks to the person actually steering the boat. In this sense, the addressee is positioned as the more active agent in the relationship, the one who can intervene, especially when compared to the “I” persona who can do nothing more than contemplate. Given the similarities in diction between this section and parts of *The Waste Land*, it is worth noting the context of those lines, even though they were written a few years later.

The wheel is referenced once in the “The Burial of the Dead” with Madam Sosotris’s “wicked pack of cards,” and invokes the traditional “Wheel” card of the tarot deck. In this section, Madame Sosotris advises, “fear death by water.” Then, the wheel

image returns in section IV of *The Waste Land*, aptly titled “Death by Water.” In this context Phlebas the Phoenician is dead, at the mercy of the currents that pick his bones in “whispers.” This short section ends with a warning: “Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you” (lines 319-321). In the context of *The Waste Land*, a poem built around both the over-abundance (in the case of Phlebas) and the dearth of water, this warning resonates on several levels. But in the context of “Goldfish,” the similarities of the diction and the image of turning the wheel, render the warning issued in *The Waste Land* relevant as well. The “you” addressed in this stanza, the only agent for action thus far, attempts to direct the ship. The warning in *The Waste Land* advises against this, almost as if this action, or intervention, involves hubris. While the speaking I is content to leave “the rest” to fate, the you intervenes and attempts to direct her destiny. Considering the drowned Phlebas, this attempt proves dangerous, if not deadly. The next allusion also anticipates *The Waste Land*, when the speaking persona contemplates the “aged sybil” in the addressee’s eyes. The famous epigraph to *The Waste Land* positions Sybil, who ages without dying, as saying “I want to die.” The aged sybil in the addressee’s eyes may embody a similar message. In the final lines of “Goldfish,” the gravity of these conversations is eased by the Laforguian turn at the end. Eventually, however, these figures and tropes evolve into *The Waste Land*, where the ameliorating effects of the Laforguian turn drop away completely.

Adding another speaker into the conversation, the oracle at the four crossroads states: ““These problems seem importunate / But after all do not exist.”” Here, the

problems the oracle speaks to are thrown off as ultimately unimportant. Though they are importunate, tedious and persistent, the oracle states that they are actually non-existent. This shift in speakers, then, also signals a shift in tone. The last five lines deliver this turn:

Between the theoretic seas  
And your assuring certainties  
I have my fears:  
--I am off for some Hesperides  
Of street pianos and small beers! (lines 33-37)

After this long exposition into the bounds of agency and the existential nature of our relationship to the divine, Eliot ultimately concludes this query with a throw-away. This “I” speaker seeks refuge from his fears in an oasis of pop music and triviality. In a move that mirrors the “philosophy through a paper straw” throw away in Part II, the speaker leaves the serious ground “between the theoretic seas” and entrenches himself in the actual, the safe refuge of street pianos and small beers. The Hesperides signal the guardian nymphs of the golden apples in classic mythology and therefore lend a sense of lighthearted flirtation to these final lines. After all the turmoil, the questioning speaker resigns himself to fate and finds shelter in the quotidian. Thus concludes the horizontal conversation of “Goldfish,” nicely circling back to the triviality of the first section.

The vertical conversation taking place in these last ten lines resonates with the more serious threads of the poem, however. Insight into the “oracle” allusion can be found in a paper that Eliot wrote on ethics, which reads: ““The task of philosophy, it appears to me, is largely one of simplification: to disentangle the riddling oracles . . . of

the world, to paragraph and punctuate them and insert the emphases” (160).<sup>19</sup> Given the proximity of “oracle” and “four crossroads of the world,” an Oedipus allusion is likely at play in these lines as well.<sup>20</sup> There are two oracles in *Oedipus Rex*, the Oracle of Delphi and Tiresius (who also appears in a vital role in *The Waste Land*). In the story of Oedipus, neither of the oracles’ prophecies is able to prevent fate from taking its course. In the case of the Delphic oracle, the prediction that King Laius’s son will kill his father and marry his mother comes to pass because the players directly attempt to thwart the prophecy, and in doing so render it possible. It is at the “fork in the road” that Oedipus kills Laius without knowing this father/son relationship. It is at this exact point the Delphic prophecy comes to fruition. This vertical thread reinforces the contemplative persona’s judgment to “gladly leave the rest to fate.” Given that fate overrides any attempt to thwart its course in Oedipus, indeed the hubris involved in the attempt to thwart fate is what makes the prophecy possible, the contemplative persona seems wise to leave the rest to fate. The action committed by twisting the wheel aligns with the hubris of Laius and Jocasta attempting to prevent the prophecy. The persona chooses the best path in passively accepting fate, though the allusions in the vertical threads do not allow for much comfort either way (the Oedipus reference specifically invokes murder). The polyvocal conversations in the poem demonstrate that the minor soul problems deal with issues of self-control and agency in both romantic and religious contexts, rendering the characters as powerless as marionettes and puppets. The polyvocal aesthetic that Eliot employs challenges the notion of an essential speaking self on a formal level, suggesting

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<sup>19</sup> Ricks (160).

<sup>20</sup> Ricks (160).

that this model of the human condition leaves little room for decisive action. Perhaps we are little more than playthings of fate, but what is the telos for this notion of the self? The answer comes a decade or so later, with the characters and context of *The Waste Land*.

### **The Impotent Characters of *The Waste Land***

Eliot uses the most complicated polyvocal methods yet in his 1922 *The Waste Land*. Here, the speakers appear, disappear, and morph into each other with little to no formal cues. In this largely vast and barren landscape, a cacophony of voices dramatizes individual scenes in the horizontal content while countless literary voices inform the poem vertically, outside of the circumference of the poem. Tracing the tropes of agency and self-control from “Goldfish” to *The Waste Land*, we find that as the polyvocal methods become more complex on a stylistic level, the notion of an essential speaking “self” is rendered more and more fragmented, resulting in a paralyzing loss of agency for most of the personas in the poem. In “Goldfish” we found puppets, marionettes, automatons, stage actors, and other figures that lacked power in the material world. In *The Waste Land*, these ineffectual figures have evolved into characters who move and speak of their own will, but are “neither living nor dead” (lines 39). In this impotent state of existence, these figures also seem largely devoid of emotion. At the poem’s conclusion, the final commandment of the Thunder god is “to control.” And yet still, the questions of “Goldfish” concerning who exactly *should be* in control are not fully reconciled in *The Waste Land*. There is a yearning for peace, understanding, and agency, but no clear path to its manifestation.

Throughout the poem there are countless characters who demonstrate passivity to varying degrees. In the first stanza, Marie, remembers being frightened when her cousin advises “hold on tight” as he whisks her down the mountain on a sled. She relates this story from a retroactive perspective, which emphasizes her emotional distance. Although she remembers being frightened and perhaps feeling free, those emotions are in the past and are therefore muted. Clinging to her cousin who ultimately steered the sled, she was a mere participant in this venture, along for the ride. As the first character that we encounter in the poem, Marie’s lack of agency seems almost inconsequential. Soon after this scene, however, we come across the hyacinth persona who epitomizes the impotence of *The Waste Land* characters:

‘You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;  
‘They called me the hyacinth girl.’  
--Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (lines 35-41)

In this scenario, the persona loses all ability to interact with the material world. The sensual diction of the scene only reinforces the persona’s impotence, as he looks into the “heart of light, the silence.” Though this last visionary image might suggest a more positive state of ecstatic union, the surrounding elements of the poem do not allow for much comfort. If “the heart of the light” and the “silence” are meant to offer solace, they are not accessible to the persona at this point. The final line of the stanza removes all

doubt of the tone here, with “*Oed’ und leer das meer*,” which translates to “Empty and barren is the sea.”

The conclusion of “The Burial of the Dead” invokes an image of hordes of these passive characters traveling over London Bridge. Though they are no longer proper marionettes, the metonymic connection to those powerless figures becomes clear through the vertical conversation in this section:

Unreal city,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (lines 60-65)

The vertical conversation here invokes a scene from Dante that further explains the state of these impotent characters. In this allusion, Dante enters the Inferno and sees countless people who made no choices in life and were subsequently rejected from both hell and heaven.<sup>21</sup> They are forever lost in death because of their indecision in life. However, in Eliot’s context the crowd flowing over London Bridge is ostensibly alive, capable of breathing and moving, but in a state of death-in-life that renders them powerless. They are the metonymic counterparts to Dante’s indecisive dead, an extension of the hyacinth persona who is “neither living nor dead.” Arguably, all of the characters in *The Waste Land* are variations of this model, incapable of enacting agency from this death-in-life state. Recalling the warnings rendered in “Goldfish,” and again in “Death by Water,”

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<sup>21</sup> See Nelson (288).



there seems to be little alternative to this impotent, lifeless state. With Phlebas dead, rising and falling through the stages of his age and youth, the universal admonition remains: “Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you” (lines 319-21). If I consider this warning in terms of action, taking the wheel of the ship to steer one’s own destiny as in the last section of “Goldfish,” the consequences of such hubris are clear. These figures will fair no better wandering listlessly though life than if they decisively take the wheel and attempt to exert control over their futures. Any chance of escaping this bleak paradigm seems moot.

The conclusion of *The Waste Land* gestures towards a type of cathartic reconciliation for this paradigm, though it remains tenuous at best. Much of “What the Thunder Said” invokes the *Vedic Upanishads*, with the Thunder god instructing humanity to give alms, show compassion, and utilize self-control. Eliot inverts the order of these instructions from the original story so that “Damyata,” or control, comes last, perhaps elevating its importance. Revisiting the nautical trope, the penultimate stanza of the poem advises:

*Damyata:* The boat responded  
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar  
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded  
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient  
To controlling hands (lines 419-23)

In these closing lines, the diction signals contentment and, even, happiness. After the instruction to control oneself, the boat easily navigates a “calm” sea to “the hand expert

with sail and oar.” The comparison that follows, however, is conditional. Like the boat now expertly steered, “your heart *would have* responded” in kind, “when invited” to submit to the “controlling hands.” To whose controlling hands, I cannot be certain, but given the context of the scene’s interaction with the divine, it seems likely that the controlling hands belong to god. Perhaps the solution to this plaguing impotence is the conscious act of submission to divine will. Making no choices in life bars one from both heaven and hell, like Dante’s hordes that death had undone, but actively taking the wheel and forcefully steering one’s own destiny ends in a drowned Phlebas. Perhaps the action needed to avoid both of these pitfalls is the *act* of submission, so that one is neither impotent nor arrogant.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: "A COUNTRYMAN OF ALL THE BONES IN THE WORLD?"

I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,  
As a disbeliever in reality?  
A countryman of all the bones in the world?  
Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes  
Part of a major reality, part of  
An appreciation of a reality  
And thus an elevation, as if I left  
With something I could touch, touch every way.  
And yet nothing has been changed except what is  
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.  
--Wallace Stevens, "As You Leave the Room" (lines 7-16)<sup>1</sup>

In the excerpt above, from Wallace Stevens's late poem, "As You Leave the Room," (1954) the poet poses the question: have I lived a skeleton's life, as a disbeliever in reality, a countryman of all the bones in the world? Though Stevens composed this poem much later than the scope of my study, he addresses some of the same questions that I explore. Nearing the end of his life, Stevens theorizes his speaker's shared identity, comprised of "bones" from all over the world. He places this shared identity in opposition to reality, with the tangible acknowledgment of snow, and finds "elevation" and "appreciation" for this thing that he can "touch in every way." In essence, Stevens questions the utility of operating in the realms of the "unreal," and revels in the agency he finds in "reality," noting that only in reality do things change. Yet, ultimately, the poem questions whether anything has changed at all, because only the "Unreal" changes.

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<sup>1</sup> This excerpt comes from Wallace Stevens's "As You Leave the Room."

Here, the relationship between the real and imaginary is complex, and the philosophical implications of Stevens's poem are many; however, this poem demonstrates that issues of a divided sense of self and the agency to act in reality continued to provoke poets and thinkers. There are entire methodologies devoted to constructions identity, and the contours of the field continually shift.

In addition to querying about how the self is constituted and how it acquires agency, this project finally points to an artistic imperative to seek and represent a kind of poetic "truth." The concept of "truth" is, at best, ephemeral, and Browning's, Piatt's, and Eliot's experimentation with multiple poetic voices suggests a sustained effort to both capture and convey a multifaceted interpretation of an artistic "truth" in their individual cultural moments. In effect, these poets create an aesthetic reality that is more complex, and, perhaps, more inclusive than what a unified poetic perspective or voice could provide. Both Browning and Eliot address the importance of an artistic truth directly in their respective works. In the final chapter of *The Ring and the Book*, inversely titled "The Book and the Ring," Browning utilizes a polyvocal approach by directing the narrator to read multiple epistolary dramatic monologues, a stylistic move that both harkens back to *Karshish* and anticipates Piatt's conversational approach outlined in the third chapter of this project. Structurally, the narrator who guides the reader through the first book also oversees the last. However, in the last book this narrator's monologue is interrupted by several other voices via letters that outline various aspects of Guido's execution and the events that follow. Through these individual voices, Browning emphasizes that each person's personal agenda necessarily dictates the consideration of

events to such an extent that a static notion of the singular “truth” of a situation becomes obsolete. Even with the many voices represented in *The Ring and the Book*, multiple elements of the narrative remain unknown. For instance, there is no record of whether or not Pompilia’s child, Gaetano, lived. Browning speculates:

Did the babe live or die? I fain would find!  
What were his fancies if he grew a man?  
Was he proud,—a true scion of the stock  
Which bore the blazon, shall make bright my page—  
Shield, Azure, on a Triple Mountain, Or,  
A Palm-tree, Proper, whereunto is tied  
A Greyhound, Rampant, striving in the slips?  
Or did he love his mother, the base-born,  
And fight i’ the ranks, unnoticed by the world? (lines 818-826)

Here, Browning acknowledges that despite his best efforts to re-create this narrative accurately, missing pieces remain. He continues by suggesting that the unknowns of story may be recovered in time, if another person takes interest in the events and seeks the answers. He writes: “I needs must find an ember yet unquenched, / And, breathing, blow the spark to flame. It lives, / If precious be the soul of man to man” (lines 832-834). Using a similar comparison to Karshish’s explanation of god blowing “vapour,” or life, into man, here Browning positions the poet or artist as the divine figure who “blows” life into an artistic truth.

At the closing of Book XII, Browning’s narrator instructs readers to approach fallible humans cautiously and, rather, trust in the truthful potential of art. Browning’s final words on this epic narrative justify both the length and scope of *The Ring and the Book*. Somewhat didactically, Browning advocates:

(Merry and amen!) learn one lesson hence  
Of many which whatever lives should teach:  
This lesson, that our human speech is naught,  
Our human testimony false, our fame  
And human estimation words and wind.  
Why take the artistic way to prove so much?  
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,  
That Art remains the one way possible  
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least. (lines 836-844)

Here, Browning communicates the importance that he gives to art. Claiming that human speech is “naught” and that testimony is “false,” Browning argues that art can provide the “one way possible” to present the truth. After composing one of the longer and more ambitious poetic works in English language, Browning justifies his choices by way of artistic ambition. In the end, his experiments with a divided sense of self and various poetic voices chronicle an artist’s attempt to represent a situation with the most accuracy possible. Indeed, some of the last lines of Book XII indicate that Browning thought art might serve even a higher purpose:

But Art,--wherein man nowise speaks to men,  
Only to mankind,--Art may tell a truth  
Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,  
Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.  
So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,  
Beyond mere imagery on the wall,--  
So, note by note, bring music from your mind,  
Deeper than ever e’en Beethoven dived,--  
So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,  
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside. (lines 858-867)

To suggest that art can “save the soul” might seem a bit hyperbolic, but, nevertheless, this passage stresses the importance that Browning placed on artistic expression in a variety

of mediums. His imperative that art may tell the truth “obliquely” thematically echoes Emily Dickinson’s famous “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.” The common thread here suggests that art can provide a vehicle for expression that gestures towards a universal understanding, if such an understanding can possibly exist. Browning’s polyvocal experiments with *The Ring and the Book* communicate a narrative through multiple viewpoints in an effort to transcend the limitations of perspective. In his closing lines, he implies that only art can convey this higher truth.

Eliot places a similar importance on striving for an artistic truth, albeit from a different angle, though, perhaps, with more skepticism, at least in his early work. In comparison to Browning, Eliot stresses the importance of situating a work of art within and among the “order” of previous artistic creations. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot contends that art should produce “a new art emotion” (43). This emotive effect is not determined by individual emotions, but, rather, depends on the “whole effect” (43). Throughout this essay, Eliot continually stresses that “meaning” can only be found in conjunction with other works of art. He writes:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. (38)

In this passage, Eliot articulates some of his theoretical ideas that influence the polyvocal experiments I highlight in this dissertation. His use of multiple voices to dramatize the poems, in conjunction with the many allusions, creates an effect that presents a “new” Modernist style while simultaneously invoking the “dead poets and artists” from the past. From this vantage point, then, Eliot’s concept of polyvocality fundamentally applies to both his poetic style and his views on art. One could argue that for Eliot, the search for agency within a divided sense of self mirrors the struggle that an artist must engage in when creating a text that is both unique and, also, “ordered” among the “existing monuments.” This process, which he deems a “continual self-sacrifice,” aligns with the active surrendering that takes place at the end of *The Waste Land*. It seems that for both Browning and Eliot, their formal experiments with multiple poetic voices stem from their individual pursuits for artistic truth.

Arguably, Piatt’s polyvocal lyrics also sought an artistic truth, but in terms of the scope of this project, her poetry reflects a much more “personal” investment. Given the biographical accounts that speak to Piatt’s continued grief for her dead children, it is nearly impossible to separate her enduring pain from the bitter cries in her poetry. At the very least, the poems that I highlight in this project reflect Piatt’s ongoing struggle to come to terms with her experiences with death and the constraints she must have felt from her contemporary consolation culture. A fuller account than I can provide here would revisit my analysis of these poets and integrate a gender critique. The lack of agency within a divided sense of self may correspond with traditional constructions of femininity, especially for Piatt’s circumstances. Additionally, there are many other



female poets whose work could inform this project, especially regarding the early formations of the dramatic monologue. New scholarship in this area suggests that Victorian women poets often used the form to explore problems of gender. Glynnis Bryon argues that for many women poets, the “ultimate target is more the systems which produce the speakers than the speakers themselves” (59). A project that incorporated this methodology would enhance my analysis of these three poets, as well as provide a more nuanced understanding of how this aesthetic form participated in evolving understandings of the self. Additionally, this project contributes to the recovery of Sarah Piatt, whose work challenges the canonical delineations of postbellum genteel poetry and American Realism. In showing that her corpus engages in the same complexities as the heralded prose of the period, my project helps to re-establish postbellum poetry as a genre worthy of scholarly attention.

As it stands now, this project highlights the evolution of an aesthetic genre alongside notions of a divided sense of self and the material agency. The dramatic monologue and its subsequent polyvocal variations explore these ideas implicitly because of the multiple “speaking” influences on the persona(s). In comparing these poets, my project establishes a relationship between form and content that reflects changing cultural understandings of how the self is constituted. Browning’s dramatic monologues explore the perspectives of various criminal and religious figures in order to understand the inner workings of their minds, and because these figures invoke such marginal points of view, their monologues should be read through an ironic lens. Tangential to these questions about selfhood were inquiries into agency and, for Browning, particularly, culpability in

reality. Sarah Piatt's conversational lyrics challenge the agency to grieve within the confines of genteel consolation culture. I position her dialogue poems as a previously unacknowledged evolution of the dramatic monologue form. For my project, Piatt's poetry ultimately bridges the gap between Browning's dramatic monologues and Eliot's polyvocality. By focusing on Eliot's early poetry, I highlight figures that both precede and reinforce the impotence of his characters in the fractured landscape of *The Waste Land*. Overall, by drawing consistent parallels between the aesthetic approaches and the content, I position poetry as a genre that both reflects and participates in an evolving understanding of selfhood and agency.

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